QUEX

by

DOUGLAS JERROLD

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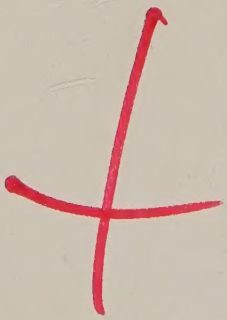

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DOUGLAS JERROLD

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CHAPTER ONE

THE Tennyson Court Hotel was part of that disastrous error of judgment which we know by the unconvincing pseudonym of Bayswater. To be exact, it was not one part but two, very crudely joined together. Built in the late sixties, the houses in Langridge Square had known only the briefest twilight of prosperity. Singly they had stood; united in a square they had fallen into spontaneous decay. True that in the nineties some of them were taken by gentlemen moving out of London and financiers moving in, but even this was only an interlude; with the arrival of the South African gold the retired colonels hurried on to Wimbledon and Tooting, and the financiers hurried in to Park Lane. By the nineteen-hundreds only the boarding-house keepers afforded the landlords a temporary bulwark against ruin. For the most part they performed an identical service to their inmates, who represented, at least at Tennyson Court, as ridiculous a collection of human derelicts as was to be found anywhere on earth.

It was certainly in a derelict capacity that Artemas

Quex had originally made his way there one raw November morning in 1905. Even to the fellow victims of Mrs. Ponsonby-Vere's ingratiating parsimony, young Quex, raw, out-at-elbows, clumsy to the point of falling over himself in the absence of any more valuable obstacle, was hardly the thing.

Quex's father had lived and died in Balham, a general practitioner of the old school, plodding along with unimaginative prescriptions and a good bedside manner. His mother, resigned to the failure of her social ambitions, had pawned her jewelry and spent her capital in driblets to keep up the appearance of distressed gentility which, so her Protestant piety assured her, represented her lot in life. The young Quex had retained only faint memories of her faded determination and her soulless gentleness driving him to frequent breakages of crockery and the insulting of his maiden aunts. Of his father, however, who survived his wife by a few years and died when he was fifteen, Artemas's recollection was more vivid.

A tall, undignified man, with a walrus mustache and a greasy black frock-coat, Dr. Quex had impressed himself on his son's mind by his sheer irrelevance to the world we know. It was impossible to imagine anyone, however healthy, actually choosing Dr. Quex as his medical adviser. He had happened to be there, one had to presume, and he had stayed there by sheer force of inertia and a certain futile strength of immobility. His patients had been less well endowed and the doctor had outlived the majority and died on the verge of bankruptcy, leaving a paltry £2,000 as the tangible memorial of his works and days. "Never be

a doctor" was the only piece of practical advice he had bequeathed to his son, but he had failed to supply, or even to suggest, an alternative. He so obviously had thought the whole business of life not worth while that his irreverent offspring used to shrug his shoulders and say, "What the governor thinks a fellow ought to do, beats me." It went on beating him till the old man's death, due to an attack of influenza which no one had taken seriously, least of all the patient himself. He just lost what consciousness he had ever had of an uninteresting world and never troubled to regain it. "Just like the governor," Artemas had commented.

Then an elderly cousin had taken over the responsibility of the boy's education and had paid his school fees for three years. Artemas had wondered why. It seemed a family trait, this indifferent benevolence without an object of any kind. His cousin had certainly been wrong in supposing that Eastchester Grammar School offered any more intensive education than Dr. Quex had provided through a weary procession of slipshod tutors. The masters of Eastchester took on with a sinister uniformity the semblance of ghosts of their own pasts, and Dr. James with his brusque cynicism never troubled to give any other explanation of their obvious unreality. They pottered through their work with the air of undertakers in a charnel-house, but Dr. James, least morbid of men, watched the process with the seasoned indifference of the professional mortuary attendant.

At the age of eighteen Quex had quietly faded from the Eastchester Courtyard which he had adorned, hands deep in trousers' pockets, for three years of calculated

idleness. He had felt nothing but a sense of relief that the farce was over. He had been, if the truth be told, more than a little ashamed of his schoolfellows. The sons of doctors—like himself—of clergymen, of briefless barristers, of insignificant *rentiers,* of writers, artists, actors, county court judges, even of civil servants, all these strange creatures had naturally treated him as one of themselves, and had assumed that he enjoyed the compliment. The great world of rich people with broughams and footmen had been nothing to all these earnest pale-faced youths who thought trade a *pis aller* for superannuated idlers whose brains were too few for the professions or their bodies too clumsy to carry them from the first Eleven to the outposts of Empire.

Quex had been different. Where the difference came from it is impossible to guess. Perhaps he was a "sport of nature": or had a complex, or even an inhibition. Facts, however, are more important than their explanations, and the fact is that Quex was—well—different. He meant to become rich. He meant to show people what he could do.

His determination had taken most of the usual forms. He had never actually stolen anything—he was too original for that—but he had always thought about life in terms of money, a peculiar inversion of values which produces such phenomena of civilization as convicts, millionaires, misers, and philanthropists. His first idea had been to put his pocket money in the savings bank and to cadge from his friends. When he found it didn't pay he had stopped cadging, but went on with the saving. He had been a realist from the age of fourteen. He had never read books because he knew

instinctively that there was no money in them, and he never played games for the same reason. He had always meant to go into business. At the age of eighteen his ambition had been achieved.

One would like to be able to say, foreseeing on the horizon the almost magnificent figure of Quex of Bubuland, that from the first young Artemas had kept his eye on the ball, that he had planned his career stage by stage and counted the cost of every bus-ride. But truth has its limitations and its inability to provide the data required by psychologists is one of the most marked. The fact is that Artemas Quex had got his way in the matter of "going into business" because there was literally nowhere else for him to go, and he had gone to Boscombe Brothers because John Boscombe—ethereal Uncle John—was his mother's brother and the junior partner in the firm. Uncle Barnabas, the senior partner, was only a cousin, really, but he was so obviously cut out for the part of the wicked uncle that the rank had been conferred on him.

Like all successful businesses, that of Boscombe Brothers, Silk Merchants, of St. Paul's Churchyard, had been founded as a family concern in the mid-Victorian age on an expanding market by humble people who hadn't forgotten how to work by the time they set out on the less exhausting adventure of buying and selling. The original brothers Boscombe, the fathers of John and Barnabas, had come south from Oldham in the early fifties with brains, courage and the still more requisite quota of solid virtue, to use an old-fashioned word no longer popular.

They had changed from chapel to church without

ostentation and had moved from Peckham to Kensington by the easiest of easy stages. In Kensington they had found their level and stayed there—wise in a generation of even intelligences seeking the middle path among the 2¾ per cents. The blunder of Majuba found the brothers blindly unconscious of impending retribution in the shape of Rand millionaires, and they had faced the closing decade of the century with an unchanged assurance that all was right with England. At last, with equal assurance, they had turned to face their Maker and the sons had succeeded to their fathers' portions in 1894, each within a few months of the other.

Poor ethereal Uncle John. If ever a man was too good for this world it was he. Bland without being unctuous, diffident without affectation, shabby through inadvertence, grubby through mere excess of modesty, nothing but a sense of duty kept him alive and nothing but inertia kept him in business. You can picture him for yourself, blinking over his spectacles at those interminable lunches at his house in Queen's Gate Gardens, where the family used to gather in hordes to eat roast beef and drink the most indifferent wine Sunday after Sunday for twenty years. A man of fifty-eight or nine when Quex went into the business, he had a peculiar appearance of being frayed all over which corresponded well enough with his general attitude to life. John Boscombe didn't fall upon the thorns of life; he stumbled into them and withdrew immediately, slightly battered, but with an air of Christian resignation.

His features were not without aspects of nobility, but they had worn badly, like his collars, which were

actually physically frayed and served no useful purpose but to display to the world a large metal stud and the painful remains of a tie discreetly hidden for the most part beneath his waistcoat. He was, in a manner of speaking, bald, but the fact did not prevent hair sprouting intensely in patches in the oddest of places. There was a small tuft right on the top of his head and another behind the left ear, while his attempts at being clean-shaven were represented by a number of cuts and a discontinuous growth of gray bristles.

Nominally the head of the Export Department, he exported, if the truth be told, little or nothing. He just waited for orders with quiet resignation and accepted them when they came with a shrug of the shoulders. "If the world were a better place," he used to say, "people wouldn't want all this—er—tinsel." His happiest days, naturally enough, were those on which there were no orders at all—a state of affairs which he professed to expect would become permanent in God's good time. "Looked at from the wider point of view," he used to say on these occasions, "the outlook is distinctly encouraging."

Compounded of ineffective virtue and somnolent benevolence, amiability confusing the routine and the reality of money-making, Uncle John had lived securely enough on the probity of his subordinates and the occasional audacities of his cousin. Elbowed out of the active direction of the business in the early days by Barnabas's domineering manner, he had enslaved himself, not unhappily, to the routine of signing letters and checks, and his assiduously cultivated indifference to worldly profits was not only an expression of academic

virtue, but a convenient salve to a minute but persistent vanity.

The senior partner, Barnabas Boscombe, was a genial old scoundrel, and, in his thieving way, an honest one. He never paid his tailor, but never defaulted on a bet, and he maintained a wife, a daughter and a mistress with impartial generosity. Smart, well-groomed, red in the face, with the deep good-natured lines of the *bon-viveur,* he concealed beneath a prepossessing exterior a fair amount of business ability. He could manage men as well almost as women, and although open-handed to the point of extravagance, he knew the value of money. The sale of silk was not to him what it was to his cousin, a slightly boring incident in a life of somnolent routine, but a slice of life, his own life—interesting in its way, profitable if you knew the ropes, solid, respectable, and slightly amusing if you didn't take it too seriously. "How do you do it?" his friends used to ask him sometimes, and his explanation—"By getting about among the mugs and fleecing them"—satisfied them. But he knew well enough that there was more in it than that, and though he welcomed the mugs' money as much as anyone he could hold his own with anyone in reason when it came to a deal. As far as he was concerned, Boscombe Brothers was a good safe Victorian business, and if he had been let alone he would have gone on gambling away his income and left his capital as his father had left it to him.

But then, on a singularly fine November day in 1905, Artemas Quex had come along.

At first, Quex had impressed the City rather more favorably than he had the inmates of the Tennyson

Court Hotel. The absence of any apparent tendency to self-advancement is a disability in society, but in a clerk a sound commercial asset, and it was as a pleasantly unambitious quill-driver that young Quex first impressed himself on the cousins Boscombe. In a word, he gave satisfaction, and in the world of commerce it is more blessed for a subordinate to give than to receive.

It was eighteen months before even Barnabas, astute and *rusé* as he was, at least before eleven o'clock in the morning, lost his first ingenuous appreciation of his nephew. But then he began finding traces of Quex cropping up in all sorts of unexpected places, writing memoranda, getting out statistics, talking in the passages about reorganization, even following him into his private office on the flimsiest pretexts and dropping hints about "proposals" which he was going to "put forward." "That boy wants a rise," was all Barnabas said at first, and he even regarded the prospect for a month or so with equanimity. But as the months wore on, Quex's assiduity took, in Barnabas's jaundiced view, an almost malignant turn. "That boy puts me right back to breakfast," he told his cousin one morning with a pained grunt of disapproval. "Does he come nosing round you too?"

Yes. Quex had come "nosing round" a good deal, Uncle John was forced to admit, but he "hadn't thought it worth while saying anything about it." Poor Uncle John, one may suspect, regarded the whole staff of the office as an imposition laid on him by Providence, and one couldn't expect him at first glance to see anything more in Quex's maneuvers than a highly regrettable zeal. The fact was, however, that Quex was "investi-

gating." The word became a favorite of his in later life and acquired a peculiar connotation of subterranean activity to which his associates learned to react with a thrill of anticipation—the anticipation of pickings only, of course: no associates of Quex ever got more.

Quex's investigations into the activities of Boscombe Brothers were extended in retrospect to cover the whole three years from his first appearance to the date of his appointment as assistant manager of the Export Department at the age of twenty-one. Actually, however, they owed their origin less to ingrained or innate avarice than to external inspiration. There is little doubt that Quex actually went on saving out of his salary till he was nearly twenty, and that he really imagined for a long time that fortunes were made in that way. The desire to be rich was certainly there, and quite early in his clerkship Quex took a first-class ticket on the Underground just to taste the joys of anticipation and to whet his appetite for cash; once he even drove up to his boarding-house in a hansom. But it was not till he began listening of an evening to the highly acidulated wisdom of a certain Dr. Corrian that the natural yearning of his adolescence began to find a practical outlet. It was under the doctor's tutelage that Quex, the merely greedy clerk, began to develop with astounding precocity into Quex, the young man with the ideas. The ideas were not by any means all of them ideas of interest to his firm, but they were of profound interest to Quex.

It had taken Quex a long time to get Corrian talking, and it took him much longer to stop him. But in the course of his unending monologues the doctor let out

a few secrets of success which, by changing Quex, helped to change England and Africa.

Perhaps the thing was accidental. Like all hardened talkers Corrian had no fixed convictions; words were like counters, and ideas stakes in the battle of wits; and in any case the soil must share the credit with the seed when we come to consider the merit of the harvest. Yet Corrian had two distinctions which no one can deny him. He was the only man of even average intelligence for whose opinion Quex ever cared two straws, and he was the only man who ever profited permanently by his association with this great captain of industry.

Corrian was a man of forty, prematurely aged, crabbed with disappointment, and concealing a weak chin beneath a straggling beard which lent an appearance of benevolence to a face otherwise hard, almost rugged. He had steely blue eyes set deeply beneath a prominent forehead and bushy eyebrows, and thin wisps of black hair strayed across his head to give him a slightly weatherbeaten appearance.

For ten years of his life he had been a ship's doctor; then, settling down to practice at a seaport town, he had proceeded to do so in a manner more lucrative than it should have been. Matters had run their usual course, and a scarcely veiled hint by the local coroner after an inquest on one of Corrian's patients had led to his retirement from the active practice of his profession. He took, in strictly private conversation, an indignant line, and even persuaded himself that he was a martyr to science sacrificed on the altar of the Nonconformist conscience. But he never approached the sac-

rificial altar again, at least not in the rôle of a victim, and he maintained the interests of his fellow practitioners more prudently by learned contributions to the Lancet on the dangers of birth control.

Idling in a Bayswater boarding-house on his unsubstantial savings, Eugene Corrian represented in their quintessence all the tenth-rate vices of the intelligentsia. Without roots, without tradition, thinking in a vacuum, responsible to no one but a God in whom he profoundly disbelieved for the integrity or the coherence of his opinions, he could cover any creed with plausible ridicule, and define the laws of progress by half a dozen self-contradictory formulæ. He had all the arrogance and all the facility of the self-appointed critic and he was characteristically blind to the fact that by denying to the world we know any validity whatever he denied in the same breath the usefulness of his own criticisms. He assumed the rôle of the detached spectator of an accident. That he was part of the accident was not apparent to him, for the simple reason that he had never done enough hard work to learn an atom of humility.

Yet he was clever. His crisp epigrams would have brought him a tolerable income, if he had cared to write, and his uncanny insight into the workings of hyper-civilized town-bred minds gave a value to his criticism of individuals which was wholly lacking to his views on important questions.

He first started talking to Quex because he overheard him saying that he worked hard because he wanted to get on. This, you see, was Quex, the clerk, with a vengeance.

"That's not the way to get on," he had grunted from his armchair by the fire, and had gone on reading, not even knowing that he had been overheard. Quex, however, whose hearing was singularly acute, had been interested, and had come across the room and tackled this benevolent-looking gentleman who had so profoundly disquieted him by upsetting his simple plan for the accumulation of wealth.

"The world's all upside down, my boy," Corrian had said finally, when pressed pointblank for an explanation. "Young men start off with one of two ideas, both wrong. They either think that they will make themselves useful to the world by hard work, and that the 'good time'—by which they mean the time when they make their own use of the world—will come as the reward of virtue, or they think that they will change the world till it takes on just the shape and size which will make it a convenient footstool. The truth is that once a man sets out on the path of honest service, he becomes a servant, and once he sets out to reform the world he ends, from sheer force of habit, by reforming himself. If you want to be a servant, be one; and if you want to be a saint, there's nothing easier. But if you want a career—" And with an amiable shrug of the shoulders the weary cynic who had, he wished you to know, not wanted a career went off to bed.

But young Quex, who meant to have a career—the idea had been there before and now he had a nice comfortable phrase which fitted it—began to sit up and think. For Corrian had struck home. Quex hadn't quite followed all his talk, but the idea that hard work in a business or a profession was fatal to material suc-

cess—by which Quex meant motor-cars, good clothes, good food, and the easy command of men and women—was disturbing. If only the man would come down to brass tacks. . . . Perhaps he never did. After all, who was Corrian to talk about a career? A seedy old man who spent his life talking in a boarding-house. Quex, however, was no speculator. If honest work was no sure road to fortune he would waste no time on it. So he pursued his inquiries.

It turned out that the severely disillusioned Corrian had his constructive side. The result was that Quex, the earnest, unimaginative clerk, with a feeble belief that earnest clerking would take him from the counting-house to the board-room, changed in the course of a very few months to the man with a purpose and a policy. His purpose was to make money, and his policy was to do so at someone else's expense. This was Corrian's first profound contribution to the career of the great man whom the Times only recently described as having grown gray in the commercial service of the Empire.

Quex was always ambitious from the sheer limitation of his mind. Size was his only standard of value. An older, more substantial-looking Quex in a big house, with a large car, going to a large office, was the only dream which Quex could project from the present reality of a young clerk in a boarding-house going in a bus to the dingy gas-lit offices of a firm of old-fashioned wholesalers in silk. But, save for Corrian, I doubt if even the overwhelming advantage of being hampered by only one idea would have carried Quex to his final eminence. It was from the disillusioned old

abortionist that he learnt what was to become the ruling principle of his life: "Fortunes are made not by making money but by taking it." What need was there for Quex, with this golden alternative open to him, to labor in the service of suffering humanity, to burn the midnight oil inventing something potentially useful to the millions who are so infinitely difficult to please?

"Take my word for it, my boy," Corrian used to say, in one form or another, night after night, "the only difference between the rich man and the poor man is that the rich man keeps back just a little more for himself at every stage"; or again:

"If you want money, you've simply got to ask for it, and see that you get it. As long as it's coming from someone else's pocket they'll always give it you."

How a man with so clear a grasp of fundamentals could come down to a precarious existence in a Bayswater boarding-house is hardly part of this story. Perhaps the fact that he escaped eventually on Quex's soaring pinions with a share of Quex's loot is the answer. He was only waiting his time and his man. But perhaps, on the other hand, it was only a coincidence that the possessor of so much transient wisdom ended up after thirty years of discreditable poverty in comparative affluence. I am disinclined, however, to give Corrian the benefit of the doubt. The one man who made anything out of Quex must have had the predatory instinct strongly developed and well under control. And there is evidence of this in the prosaically detailed advice which Corrian gave when, in Quex's phrase, "he came down to brass tacks."

Quex had described bibulous Uncle Barnabas and

ethereal Uncle John at some length. The impression Corrian got was that in a staid family business, pursuing usefully if a trifle dully a simple policy of giving good value for money and being content with a small but regular profit, there was no future for the ingenious Quex. But Corrian's eye had lighted at once on the one hopeful feature of the business, which was their £40,000 worth of stock. This was the hidden reserve, the secret hoard of gold waiting to be tapped. "Tap it, my boy," was the succinct and eminently practical advice.

The first thing, of course, had been to get into a position to do so, and it was primarily for this purpose that the Gospel of Service had been formulated. Uncle John was an easy prey to uplift, and the idea that he was failing to fulfil a great moral duty by not selling silk for export at half the price of his competitors had a twofold appeal to him. In the first place a reduction in price was a kindness to the consumer; in the second place it held no apparent prospect of profit. The difficulty was that poor Uncle John's department was just as ill-organized for selling at a loss as for selling at a profit, and who but young Artemas could get it once more into fighting trim? For many months there seemed to be no way out, but a long succession of pathetic appeals from John Boscombe to his cousin, a systematic barrage of mysterious hints from Quex, and the fortunate coincidence of an impending twenty-first birthday brought the first stage of the campaign at last to a satisfactory conclusion. Eighteen months had passed since Dr. Corrian had first unlocked the gates of wisdom to Quex's eager footsteps, but with Quex's

appointment as assistant manager of the export department, the hour for bigger things came at last.

Corrian's plan was a very simple one. He had suggested liquidating the vast stock of old-fashioned high-quality on the Continent at very low prices, but on a basis which gave Quex a handsome commission on turnover, and replacing it with extremely inferior stocks to be sold, on the strength of the good-will to be created, on less generous terms.

The plan was not a bad one. Boscombe Brothers were old-fashioned. They believed in giving value, and they were competing with firms who knew that the only thing that mattered was to persuade their customers that they were getting value. They had never noticed that the money was passing into new pockets which simply asked to be picked. The symptomatic complaint of old dowagers all over Europe, that "no one ever makes stuff of the old-fashioned quality nowadays," was not true of Boscombe Brothers. Quex simply proposed to remedy an intolerable anachronism. The age of shoddy had found its prophet! The hour and the man!

The long and the short of it was that, in the end, Quex was allowed to build up his sales organization, and go ahead. His instructions to his new staff of travelers were verbal, but the general principle was clear enough. "Get orders at any price, as long as they're big orders for long periods, and don't ask too many questions." The travelers jumped at it, of course. And even Barnabas, as the first orders came in, dreamt dreams of Eldorado; and only poor Uncle John felt that it was just like life that a really disinterested action such as

Quex's should involve the conversion of a firm of Victorian merchants into a pushing enterprise for ramming inferior goods down the throats of a feckless generation who didn't know the difference between good and bad in silk any better than they did in art, religion or statecraft. Indeed, for all his enthusiasm for the Gospel of Service, he felt in the remote depth of his subconsciousness a feeling that the whole thing was, in some queer early Victorian sense, "unsound."

Of course the plan was immensely successful. Quex's prophecy of doubling the turnover in a year was absurdly wide of the mark; he multiplied it by seven, and took 3 per cent. of the proceeds. His "just a hundred or two to make me feel I'm really beginning to do some useful work" turned out to be more than a thousand pounds in the first year. When he got his check he took Corrian out to dinner at the Trocadero and gave him a whole bottle of claret.

The only person who was thoroughly uneasy was Charles Weston, the firm's solicitor, who had had to draw up the agreement with the enigmatic assistant manager. Weston did not think for a moment that Quex was a fool, but that didn't mean that he had liked the idea of Quex gambling on his own with the assets of a company in which he had no shares. Decidedly he had not got the impression that Quex was that sort of man. And the fact that Quex had refused to sign more than a three years' agreement was, to his prosaic mind, just a little significant.

"Ruin the business and clear out?" was the question which had formed itself in Weston's mind. Any other answer was not easy. "Someone's put him

up to this," was another uneasy impression which gradually hardened into something like a conviction.

Of course Quex had had to have his agreement, but Weston had taken the opportunity of having a good deal of talk with him, and it was this which had left a nasty taste in his mouth. For Weston's firm were not company solicitors, but old-fashioned family lawyers with their eyes firmly fixed on the future. The immediate prosperity of their clients didn't worry them unduly. A safe 3½ per cent. was their motto. And it wasn't even the amount that Quex was going to make that had worried Charles Weston: it was the lack of decent motive behind it. It was like a mischievous child cutting down a tree (with someone else's hatchet —yes, undoubtedly the hatchet would have been just filched on the quiet, probably from one of the gardeners' boys with whom he was too familiar), to get a particularly good apple which he couldn't reach. And then the little beast rushes in to mother to say, "Look, how clever I am. You told me I should never be able to get that apple. But I've got it."

And, damn it, he had.

The fact came home to Weston with a bump as he sat at his desk one morning reading the figures for the first year of Quex's stewardship. This illiterate sphinx was making £1,000 a year by the infernally simple process of liquidating somebody else's assets for a commission.

But there was nothing to be done now, and with a sigh poor old Charles Weston went on with his draft of young Timothy Brenton's marriage settlement. That was the sort of thing he liked. Money in Trustee

securities: all legacies over £100 to be invested; everything tied up for three generations and a heavy life insurance policy into the bargain. No nonsense here about not being able to save. The boy had damned well got to save, or his trustees would save for him. And no commission, by Jove! It came to him, suddenly, as a contrast. This large estate worth ten times the whole capital of Boscombe Brothers had been administered during a minority by the two trustees, and well administered too, for just nothing. And there was young Quex peddling about with half-pennies (comparatively) and getting pickings with a lawyer's agreement to back it all up.

And his fist came down on his characteristically solid mahogany desk with a querulous bump when the telephone rang.

It was Miss Boscombe—Barnabas's rather pretty daughter, whom Weston knew only in glimpses, flashing through the hall with her mother and a party of young people on their way to the ball, or just off to Prince's or Sandown or Goodwood. . . . What could she want? And while the telephone was buzzing away with the pinchbeck activity so characteristic of man's inventions, his lawyer's mind revolved hurriedly all the possible contingencies which might drive ultra-Edwardian young ladies to ring up their father's solicitor. Bridge debts or a dressmaker's bill possibly. . . .

"Yes, Charles Weston speaking. . . . What? . . . Heart failure! . . . I'm so terribly sorry. . . . Of course, I'll come round at once. . . . " And with almost indecent haste Weston put down the receiver. The end of another chapter. Poor old Barnabas.

But even while revolving these commonplaces Weston was conscious of some peculiarly unpleasant association in his mind. The peaceful death of Uncle Barnabas had got a sting which eluded him only till his eye caught sight of those figures on his desk and remembered Quex. The young money-grubber would need watching now.

Yes! Here, indeed, was a menace to the grave's victory; and it was with something less satisfying than the usual complacent consciousness of beneficent survival that Weston made ready to go round to chaperon the pretty Miss Boscombe on her first voyage of exploration into the valley of shadows.

We need hardly accompany them. The funeral of Barnabas Boscombe was attended by his daughter, his solicitor, Uncle John, and the head cashier of Boscombe Brothers, and two anonymous ladies in unconscious rivalry sent wreaths. It was a cold morning and Quex, who had not got a top-hat, excused himself on the ground of rheumatism.

But when it was all over there was business to do. Somebody had to take charge of Boscombe Brothers, and that somebody could hardly be Uncle John. To sell the business was the obvious solution, indeed the only possible one, but had Quex left anything to sell? In the first year of his expert scheme he had cleared out the whole of the old stock on a small margin of profit, and his travelers had taken orders all over Europe for a year ahead. But it was all just a little too good to be true. The legion of new customers wouldn't get the same quality a second time, Weston shrewdly suspected, and he also suspected that a good

many of the odd seven hundred of them were long firm fraud merchants, petty gamblers in market prices, and people of that kidney. The Gospel of Service had left Charles Weston cold, but he had heard of the Gospel of Turnover as preached by people taking commissions on it, and it made him hot all over. These family businesses were the devil.

Quex, on the contrary, found them very stimulating. He had been just a little afraid of Uncle Barnabas. The man's recklessness, his frankness, his unabashed thirst, his daily toll of racing tips which sometimes came home, caused Quex a good many sleepless nights. Of course the man was a fool, but he was the type of fool who might want a straight answer to a straight question. Now Quex would have a free hand, and if he couldn't make enough in three years to be independent of an old fogy like Uncle John he would be a fool.

The first discussion between Quex, Uncle John and Weston was rambling and inconclusive.

Uncle John wanted to leave things as they were, till someone in the family could be induced to buy the whole business.

"Paying compensation to me," Quex suggested.

"Oh, we should sell you as part of the assets," Weston remarked with something near a sneer.

"Suppose I refuse to be sold?" Quex blinked.

"The purchasers would sue you for breach of contract. The amount of damages they would get would depend on the jury's estimate of the value of your services. If the jury took a pessimistic view you would have to pay very little." Weston's smile grew more and

more benign as he forecast this comforting possibility. But his optimism was to be rudely shattered.

Uncle John had felt bound to intervene at this point. "After all, if there is any difficulty, we can carry on as we are for another two years. I should, of course, prefer to retire, but in the interests of Barnabas's family I am sure that Mr. Quex, like myself, will make any reasonable sacrifice."

"Personally," Quex agreed, "I am ready to take on any amount of work, if my responsibility is recognized. I don't feel, as a matter of fact, that it would be fair on my part to leave while the new export scheme is still in the early stages of development. The business is, in my view, undergoing a very critical period of transition. To try to sell now would mean sacrificing the whole fruits of the scheme. Personally, if I were asked for figures of the export department, I should feel bound to say that just at the moment there is very little to sell."

"You will not be asked for figures," Weston snapped.

"But I might volunteer information," Quex blurted back. "I think we are all agreed that in business, frankness is the first principle of honesty. Let us start by being frank among ourselves. Barnabas's export scheme . . ."

"Barnabas's scheme?" Uncle John queried, with a puzzled look.

"My uncle was the senior partner, and so I think it only right to call it his scheme," Quex explained.

"The point is immaterial," Weston put in; "perhaps Mr. Quex would continue."

"Uncle Barnabas's scheme is a very speculative one; personally, I have a certain amount of confidence in it, but an intending purchaser might take a different view. In any case, Uncle John"—here Quex almost literally turned his back on poor Weston, as one appealing from earth to heaven—"you will agree that the position should be made extremely clear."

"Quite, quite," Uncle John murmured, entirely bewildered.

"But if I am to be responsible for the working of this very intricate scheme, which has got to be made successful if the business is ever to be sold at a reasonable price, my position in the business must be entirely changed."

"Aren't you forgetting that you are under a contract?" Weston asked impatiently.

"Technically, I am," Quex replied, "but I should be the last person to take advantage of that fact. I could, of course, refuse any sort of responsibility, and leave it to you and Uncle John to carry on, or to take the risk of appointing a manager who knew nothing of the technicalities of the scheme, and who would have to rely on what I could tell him."

"Or on what you chose to tell him," Weston suggested.

"I resent that remark," Quex replied. "I resent it most strongly."

> ". . . *Pudet haec opprobria vobis*
> *Et dici potuisse et non potuisse refelli,*"

Weston murmured, with one eye on the ceiling.

"I beg your pardon?" Quex cut in.

"I'm glad," Weston answered unexpectedly, and for the first time in the interview Quex was at a loss.

Poor Weston, like most indifferent strategists, was a good parade-ground tactician, and he seized the moment—the one and only moment—when Quex was off his guard to bundle him out of the room.

"Well," he said, getting up with a Napoleonic air, "John and I have some family business to talk over. We'll let you know what we decide about this other matter. Good morning."

Quex was genuinely surprised to find himself outside the door, and alone at that. But he knew that his position as manager and the four-figure salary which was the natural concomitant was virtually his already. Corrian had been right again. "Never ask for a favor," he'd said; "just assume that you're conferring one. Then if they don't jump at it, threaten them with the penalties of ingratitude. It looks better than blackmail and has the same result." By Jove, the old bore knew something . . . and that fellow Weston was as big a fool as Uncle John.

"That boy has no entrails," was Weston's terser commentary on the ingenious Quex.

Of course Quex got his way. There was really nothing else to be done. The business had got to be sold, and no one was going to buy just at the moment when the whole of the solid assets had been liquidated and the newer and more profitable trade in shoddy imitations was yet to seek. Weston was quick enough to see that Quex really held all the cards. With a manager appointed from outside, Quex could not be

trusted to cooperate, and the business could not afford to compensate him. Besides Quex had really developed the export department on a very intensive scale. He had created a network of agents, and sub-agents, none of them in anybody's confidence but his own, and the vast process of stock liquidation was linked up with all sorts of complex unwritten understandings as to future business relations with the new customers abroad.

Weston had begun negotiations with a vague intention of making Quex look as small as he could and geting as much information out of him as he could. As we have seen, he got nothing but a generously phrased offer of assistance on terms left delicately vague, and vague assurance of impending disaster if Quex's confoundedly generous offer was refused. Quex's audacity had been something quite unforeseen. At their earliest interview, Quex had appeared as the young enthusiast with an idea; at their second as the young enthusiast taught by a hard experience not to trust overmuch in men's assurances, and asking bluntly but still rather meekly for some legal safeguard of his rights. His final appearance as the indispensable man, willing as a concession to cooperate, on terms, was profoundly irritating.

But it was worse, from Weston's point of view. It was utterly immoral. Being paid was only a formality to Weston. Pleasant, but still a formality. He would work exactly the same without any expectation of getting a farthing . . . he had done so, indeed, hundreds of times. And it was just this genuine consciousness of an ultimate loyalty to ideal aspirations which made his own comfortable fortune accumulated over

thirty years of hard work something not wholly ignoble in his eyes. Frankly, Weston confessed to Uncle John, he felt that "Quex's commission-taking is—well, different."

Curious, these differences, which seemed to strike so many people in so many connections during the early years of Quex's career.

CHAPTER TWO

QUEX, the business man, as he was to be seen one evening in July, 1911, walking up the steps of Tennyson Court, cut a very different figure from Quex the raw young clerk, and even from Quex the assistant manager with just one foot on the ladder. He was no longer lanky but tall; no longer awkward but merely brusque and businesslike; no longer looked out-at-elbows, but just plainly dressed. He was twice as broad, fatter in the face, and had lost the lean and hungry look of the unsuccessful man. Nor were these changes superficial. He had acquired an illimitable assurance which he never lost, except in moments of physical danger, and a knowledge of men which never failed him at all. He had learnt that the idea that all men had their price was an expensive fallacy leading to much overpayment, and that nine men out of ten never put a price on themselves at all, but are to be had for nothing but promises of the vaguest possible kind. He had learnt that the man who gets on is the man who borrows, not the man who saves. Above all he had learnt to know himself. He had kept his head above water and it had come to him in the process that he was actually swimming. His daring experiment in the export market had come off. The bank had financed the business and the book debts had grown at twice

the rate of the overdraft. Big business with a vengeance.

There had been difficulties with the auditors, difficulties even from time to time with the bank, but he had kept cool, said nothing and got away with it.

For three years he had had a wonderful time, and now it was all over and he had the money to play with.

"Aren't you sorry to leave?" one of his boarding-house acquaintances asked him as he sat down after dinner the same evening in what, in those famous three years, had become "his" armchair; and he had found himself saying quite unexpectedly, "Well, it's been great fun." Then he had pulled himself together. "But a great responsibility," he had added hurriedly. "These Socialists don't realize what it means to be an employer, to have all the daily worry, with a hundred or so people and their families depending on you to do the right thing every time." And two colonels had grunted sympathetically, and old Mrs. FitzGibbons had wondered what Lloyd George would say to that.

Quex had got an audience, you see, by 1911 and their naïve admiration for this tall young man who didn't care a damn for anyone pleased him in his weaker moments. Yet it was not to win the complacent tolerance of the "quite decent people in my hotel" that Quex had worked like a Trojan for three years since Barnabas's death. In his heart of hearts he despised these indigent *rentiers* and faded pensioners thrown on the tender mercies of the new Jerusalem by a too trusting generation of comparatively honest men. He had had as a matter of fact no alternative but to carry his eager speculations to the utmost limit of hazard,

and a good way beyond it. He had to go on expanding his turnover, not only to get the required minimum of ready money coming in, but to keep his commission checks at the requisite figure, and to do all this he had to cut his profit lower and lower and give longer and longer credit with less and less investigation. The curve of sales couldn't drop till the ink was dry on the agreements for the sale of the business.

Only after three years had this happy consummation been achieved. It was indeed only two days before his unguarded admission that it had all been "great fun" that Quex had succeeded in selling the vastly increased business of Boscombe Brothers to a syndicate of young men who, with the thoroughness characteristic of their world, had just completed a three years' training in the subtleties of commerce behind the counter in the retail department of Hobsons'. The syndicate had, of course, assets more substantial than a sound commercial education with no damned nonsense behind it. It had money. Robin Smith, James Robinson and Harold James were the sons of Bradford manufacturers, sent respectively "to learn the retail end of the business," "to study the habits of the fools with the money," and "to begin as I began, my boy, behind the counter." Three minds, you will observe, without a single thought. Only two of the sons, however, took after their fathers.

Quex had run across these beauties by one of those strokes of chance which show once more that vice seldom goes unrewarded. For the girl who sold Quex his socks—Hobsons' unique half-hose—half a crown a pair—was extremely attractive, and quite ludicrously

underpaid. She was the embodiment of Spartan virtue, Quex confidently believed, but she liked a good dinner and was prepared to pay for it in those sentimental approaches and physical complaisances which come so naturally to the virgin heart.

Quex the manager, with big responsibilities and a handsome balance at the bank, was perhaps less innocent in affairs of the heart than Quex the clerk. But Anne Lawrence was his first conquest. She really liked this tall overbearing young man, with his shock of fair hair, his strong jaw, his sparkling blue eyes which held the promise of humor, and his well-filled pocket which held the certainty of entertainment.

Of course, in the end she got her way, and Quex, innocently triumphant at having broken down the strongest of barriers by the sheer force of personality, felt for the first time in his life a feeling of conscious virtue.

What is more important to our story, however, is that it was through Anne that Quex had come to know the nucleus of the Boscombe Silk Syndicate Limited, or, as she preferred in those days to call them, "three of the boys." Unnecessary here to detail the innumerable dinners, river-parties, Saturday lunches and matinées at which these young daredevils from the North country spent their fathers' money with freedom, and Quex invested a percentage of his savings with calculated prodigality on the seduction of maiden charms and the inspiration of masculine confidence with an eye to business. Nowadays the fun would have been faster and more expensive, and the modern Quexes must be made of sterner or at least more

acquisitive stuff. But those were the distant days when gentlemen still danced in private houses and the Five Hundred Club was only tolerated under the sneering sobriquet of the City and Suburban; when it took more than a little ready cash and a judicious use of soap and water to gild the provincial pill; and when attractive young "secretaries" could not be sure, however successful they might be, of rubbing shoulders with royal dukes and less royal ladies at night clubs and cabarets.

So Quex found it all fairly easy. He was, indeed, in this little group to which he had attached himself, something of a personage. True enough that "the boys" spent money like water, but it was tacitly understood that this was a necessary solution for a certain loss of prestige entailed, even in the case of shop assistants *pour rire,* by days spent behind the counter selling underclothes at Hobsons'. Quex, the son of a doctor and the manager, by right of birth almost, of an established firm of merchants, quietly remote from the rough and tumble of "hands" and "the works," was under no obligation to do more than offer to pay with a genial tolerance of alien follies. Moreover the fact that it was Quex who was the seller necessitated a certain reserve. The essence of salesmanship is the assumption of a genuine reluctance to sell overcome by motives verging on altruism. The creation of the demand must be a process which synchronizes only by a golden stroke of fortune with the availability of the supply. This at least was Corrian's doctrine. The positive form of publicity—"YOU want cigarettes: WE have them"—was, he used to say, "a psychological

ineptitude. Nobody wants to be told they want a thing and they hate being told where to get it. It's a process which combines the unpleasantness of being found out with horror of being put right."

Following his mentor, Quex spent three months expatiating on the joys of independence, the scope for a young man in a business of his own, and the cramping influence of relations. His words sank in. The weekly scene immortalized by the daring and unconventional young dramatists of Manchester, where the son of the prosperous chapel-going manufacturer refuses on conscientious grounds to go to church and is backed up by a disreputable uncle with a flask in his pocket and an overdraft at the bank, had been enacted often enough in the stately homes of James, Smith and Robinson, with the one difference that the sons' protests were made in the secrecy of their hearts. But if they had money of their own these young daredevils would know how to spend it. They were very certain of that.

When it came to details, the careful training to which the embryo syndicate had been condemned showed its defects. They had not appreciated the profound truth that any fool can produce goods, but that it takes a genius of such Napoleonic proportions to dispose of them (in a world where 30 per cent. of the population are in desperate need of every form of commodity) that the mere manufacturer will be lucky indeed if he gets for his products 101 per cent. of the money he spends in making them. "Genius does not go begging," as Quex remarked one day in a flash of inspiration, "it goes taking. You've got to be a merchant in these days

to make real money. Take the goods to the right market and squeeze out of the market the utmost it will pay—that's what we have to do, and all the time we have to shoulder the risk which you fellows never have to bother about."

"But if we didn't make the beastly stuff, you couldn't sell it," Robinson put in. "That's what my old gov'nor always says. Got the answer to that?"

Quex had. "Don't you see, my dear fellow, you're putting the cart before the horse. If we hadn't got the organization to sell your stuff, you wouldn't be *able* to make it. The potential customer doesn't count. It's the actual customer that you depend on, and he doesn't exist till I've found him. And you've got to pay me for finding him. So has the customer. That's the beauty of it. But it's quite fair. Without me you'd both of you be in the soup."

As it was they were in the Trocadero, being entertained by the parasitic gold of the manufacturing Mr. Robinson. And Quex was enjoying himself, for he'd got a most distinct bite. The evening rise, no doubt, and for the first time in his life Quex regretted that he was not the host. Another double brandy would have been useful. It might have paid a million per cent.

"The boys" had been, of course, a bit difficult. They were decidedly frightened about launching out independently of their tyrannical fathers, and they preferred dining with "some sporty girls" to talking business with Quex. So it usually came to mixing love and commerce in a complicated manner with much interruption. Quex himself in the heat of his first love affair let the business go for a whole three months,

but this oversight proved a blessing, for meanwhile Robinson got engaged, and as his girl "wanted to live up West—her people are rather toney, you know"—he felt obliged to pursue the often-discussed syndicate with real energy.

At this stage Quex had seen Weston. He was enthusiastic. Although utterly without initiative, Weston had a certain practical shrewdness. He had felt that Quex was up to no good, but he couldn't for the life of him see how to prevent him doing harm. Now Quex came along and solved his problem for him. Offered the opportunity Weston was infinitely more capable of making use of it than Quex, who was going to be the gainer.

"Curious thing," he said to Uncle John, "here's this fellow depreciating the assets of the business right and left, dipping his hand into the till the whole time, and then when I'm at my wit's end to see where the catch is, he comes along with a scheme which not only saves his face but saves ours also."

Uncle John was less impressed, because the whole affair had been a mystery to him. Quex in his view could do anything except the things which were worth doing. And selling a family business, however great the profit, was emphatically not one of the things which were worth doing.

"If Artemas is as clever as you say, why should we sell?" Uncle John asked. "Personally I hate business, but I feel somehow tied to the firm, and if there are bad times coming, do you think we ought to—well—leave the problem to these three young men who don't seem from your account to be—" And

Uncle John paused from sheer inability to express in words what he felt about these three young men.

This was the question Weston had dreaded. Uncle John was on the verge of ruin, he suspected, and was really looking forward to saving his soul in the process. But Weston had his duty to the widow and orphan to stimulate him in this strange partnership with provincial exuberance and pinchbeck commercialism which had been thrust upon him by the preposterous Quex.

"My dear John," he answered, "it's my duty to accept the best offer I can get on behalf of the interests I represent. I think Quex is a scoundrel, and you think he's a wizard. But magic is as bad a basis for an investment as fraud. We don't know what the boy's game is. If the business goes on paying 6 per cent. the selling price makes it a first-rate bargain to this precious syndicate. If it goes up in smoke, it's a damned bad bargain. If I were the syndicate I should take the risk: they're young, with money behind them, and we must be broad-minded enough to assume that beneath their rather deplorable surface, they've got brains. Heredity and all that. But I'm not the syndicate. I'm a trustee who can't take risks with his trust money even if he wants to. A trustee who staked the money entrusted to him on Quex's honesty would deserve to go to jail. It would be culpable negligence."

"You're rather unreasonable, Charles," John put in at this point with an apologetic glance over his spectacles; "the boy has done really wonderful things since he came. Of course, poor Barnabas made a rash agreement, but I was just as responsible, and it really has turned out well so far."

"Perhaps you're right," Weston put in hurriedly, "and if so our last reason in the world for not selling goes by the board."

"Well, well! You must do what you think best for the family as a whole."

So Uncle John agreed. Weston heaved a sigh of relief.

After this the deal was hurried through. The business was sold to the syndicate for £40,000 in cash and £25,000 in fully paid-up shares in the new company. A third of the shares went to Quex, and the balance was divided between Uncle John and Barnabas's estate. Uncle John joined the board of what now became a company, and satisfied his loyalty. Quex sold his shares to Robinson's father-in-law at 10 shillings each and satisfied himself.

Strangely enough he also satisfied Robinson, who bought at the same moment (and, oddly enough, at par) the shares left on Weston's hands, and so acquired the controlling interest quite unbeknown to his reputed partners. Quex, as Robinson often said, had "acted as a real pal," and, if James and Smith took an ungenerous view of a very ordinary transaction, the simple explanation was, as Quex remarked, that they were not gentlemen. They even mentioned the word fraud, but Robinson was equal to the occasion and offered without any reservation to acquire their shares on the same terms as those on which he had acquired Quex's. The offer was refused. If they had been gentlemen, Robinson reflected regretfully, it might have been accepted.

As Quex himself always said, he never regretted

selling the shares. It is a matter to which, of course, he has more than once made public reference, and this episode in the life of a great Empire builder cannot be better summed up than in his own words, spoken on the occasion of his old friend's knighthood conferred by a grateful Coalition in the dark days of 1921 when the apostles of vision were becoming discreditably few.

"In my young days I had the privilege of being actively associated with Sir James Robinson [cheers]. I first met him when he was laying the foundations of that vast practical experience which we all know and respect while serving in a quite humble capacity in the silk department of Hobsons'. We were almost inseparable. Indeed on one occasion we went to Paris together [laughter], not to study silk [more laughter], at least not in bulk [loud and prolonged laughter]. And it is the proudest memory of my life that I was not only instrumental in the foundation of the Boscombe Silk Syndicate, but was able to arrange that our guest tonight should have, from the start, that strong controlling interest which has been the secret of his success. I was a poor man then, and I was not satisfied with my position—I wish young men today were as easily dissatisfied as I was [hear, hear]—as manager of what was then the small family business of Boscombe Brothers. I saw that what the business wanted was energy, youth, practical experience of the manufacturing and retail ends of the business, and, above all, undivided control. The essence of merchandising is service [loud cheers], and the essence of service is a personal knowledge of your customer and his needs. So I suggested to Sir James that he and some friends

of his should form a syndicate to acquire the business of Boscombe Brothers, from which my dear old uncle —now, alas, no longer with us [sympathetic shuffling of feet]—was anxious to retire after forty years of devoted service.

"I have often been asked why I did not throw in my lot with the syndicate. I have already told you. It was in my opinion essential that there should be, at that critical time, not a syndicate of four equal partners, but a strong controlling interest operated by one man, and I saw in my friend Jim Robinson the man for the job. Was I wrong? [Loud cries of 'No!'] We all know what Sir James has made of the business. He has often reminded me of our early negotiations and he even paid me the compliment of saying that the syndicate paid for the business just twice what it was worth. [Loud laughter.] But I think you know Sir James well enough to disregard any suggestion of that sort. [Hysterical applause.] I ask you to drink to the health of a man who knows a bargain when he sees one, the sort of man we respect for his shrewdness and congratulate on his success."

So, many years later, did Quex pass judgment on Quex. Satisfied though he was with his own share in the transaction, this satisfaction paled before his genuine admiration of Robinson's maneuvers. It was not, of course, the fact that Robinson had risen from being a shopwalker to being a captain of industry that still impressed Quex so many years later. It was Robinson's diabolical skill in extricating himself and the business from the "superficially desperate position" into which "my Uncle Barnabas's management"

had landed it. "Robinson," he used to say, "showed that readiness to face losses which is the essence of commercial success."

Quex had not, we may be sure, anticipated the full extent of the difficulties in which Boscombe Brothers had been involved at the time of the sale. The reason was that it was Quex's unvarying rule to anticipate nothing unpleasant. "Life would be too complicated," he told Weston when the deal was just about to come off, "if we had to think for other people as well as ourselves." "Bear ye one another's burdens" may have been the gospel of Christ—Quex's was different.

So different, indeed, was it that as Quex lay back one evening, in his armchair at Tennyson Court, expatiating on the ingratitude of working-men, his being was suffused with a comfortable vision of ease and wealth which was to last him to the end of untroubled days, broken by no dismal forebodings or maudlin regrets. For *him* there would be no Gethsemane. *His* conscience at least, was clear. "Rich men bear no malice, Quex," Corrian had remarked when Quex told him of certain ungenerous criticisms on the transaction which had reached his ears, and Quex had accepted the rebuke with the magnanimity of the twelfth Apostle, who, we may be sure, accepted a round figure without any haggling.

The world was indeed a pleasant place to Artemas Quex in that torrid June of 1911. For he had made money. The sensation of earning money was tolerable; the sensation of earning easy money was definitely pleasant; but the sensation of making money was something triumphant. He had brought it off. When

he looked back now on those years in the City when he had pretended to be interested in racing, in religion, in the pleasures of love, or sport, even in literature, the slight feeling of having compromised himself with trivial interests, which had haunted him from time to time, was finally lost in the knowledge that it had all been worth while. He was not the type to moralize, except in public and to a selected audience. "I've been playing with those fools for five years," was all he said to himself, "and I've won."

And with this reflection, very Quexlike in its simplicity, Quex wrote "received" to the account.

He had learnt a lot in his eight years' progress from clerk to company promoter. He had learnt to work, and to make other people work. He had learnt how to play on the venality of knaves and the foibles of honest men. He had seduced a really delightful girl, and earned her undying gratitude; he had learnt the technique of the social round, a little crudely perhaps, but well enough. He knew how to order a good dinner for himself and how to avoid ordering one when entertaining people of no financial importance. Once he had referred to the Ritz as "not a bad pub," and got away with it.

Finally he had been a party to a really creditable piece of company promoting which had opened out to him a vista of endless possibilities. He had been, perhaps, a trifle lucky. But if he had been more than a trifle rash in his pursuit of turnover, he had really had no alternative. Without those bad debts his commission would have been ridiculous, and the turnover would not have attracted a purchaser for the business.

No doubt he had overdone it, and it was lucky that he had destroyed those instructions to his travelers which were at the bottom of the whole matter. But it was even luckier that he had issued them, for they were at the bottom of those enormous commission checks of his which were now earning a comfortable 3½ per cent. in consols.

"I suppose," he said to Corrian one evening, "everyone makes mistakes."

"Everyone makes mistakes," the learned doctor repeated sententiously, "but only the fools pay for them."

CHAPTER THREE

QUEX, the business man, was too considerable a figure to remain any longer in the shoddy atmosphere of a Bayswater boarding-house. Such places were good enough for professional men and employees, but, as Corrian had pointed out, "to be rich, one has to spend money like water."

Quex was not the man to evade his responsibilities and he moved in the autumn of 1911 to rooms in Half Moon Street, to acquire laboriously the technique of being waited on without embarrassment by a gentleman's servant. It was not, of course, that Quex felt any kind of social inferiority. He had too little imagination for one thing, and too genuine a contempt for poverty for another. But he could not help feeling lonely, standing on the threshold of the great world which he had to conquer, not out of any desire for its subtler pleasures, but because its conquest was, as far as he was concerned, to be achieved only with a golden key and because he knew instinctively that the acid test of the quality of gold lies in its ability to open the doors of Mayfair. Yet why, he said to himself, should he shirk the test? After all, the modern Cæsar does not come with a blare of trumpets, see and conquer; his skill is shown in "getting in" unnoticed and "getting out" with the maximum of speed. Quex, who was to show

himself the swiftest Roman of them all, had made at least a creditable start. He had a five-figure bank balance, and he had covered up his tracks.

Still, as Quex sat back, one September evening, in his armchair before the fire and looked upon Quex in the looking-glass over the mantelpiece, he felt lonely. It was all so alien to him, this business of dressing for dinner, and being polite to elderly dowagers, and talking about sport and the theater. If only he could have someone with him who shared his contempt for this sort of thing. *"Was für Plunder,"* Blücher had commented as he rode through the streets of London after Waterloo. Quex, taxying into the outskirts of Mayfair, had not been equally impressed. He wouldn't, however, allow himself to be beaten, and after a few months in the zealous pursuit of invitations—when they came he put them on his mantelpiece, authentic if not very valuable loot—he began to take a more optimistic view.

At last a photograph of himself with an actress at Sandown actually appeared in an illustrated paper. It was a revealing moment which marked a stage in our island history. From that moment Quex decided to go right ahead. It suddenly came to him in a flash that these invitations on his mantelpiece, from his stockbroker's wife, from Robinson's father-in-law, from Uncle John's brother-in-law's widow who had married an actor, from some Americans who had met him at Phyllis Court and mistaken him for a gentleman, from the head of the London Unionist Association to which he had sent a check for £50, from a rising novelist who wanted him to finance a newspaper, from

an Irish peer whom he had met in a bar and an English peeress who had met him at a seaside hotel, were authentic admission tickets to the London season. Like his old-fashioned father, he had always had at the back of his mind an idea of London society with a ring-fence round it, a certain number of people inside, and a much larger number outside, of whom, of course, he was one. Suddenly, in a flash, he caught from a different angle the truer view of a number of rich people amusing themselves in the same way, on the same days, and excusing a painful lack of originality on the pretext of exercising an exclusive privilege. Suppose the thing broke down, owing to sheer force of numbers, would the present lot have the sense to clear out in time and set up new standards, or would they hang on and let themselves be swamped?

Had Quex had more knowledge of the world he would have been even less doubtful of the answer. The swamping process was in full swing, and the future would see the last of the Whigs kicked below stairs by the Tory mob; the age of small men was coming fast. The generation which cared to govern was passing away. The Whig hand had lost its cunning, and behind the Tory *revanche* was not the dislike of progress, but the dislike of authority. They were men who resented the academic ordering of society on grounds of principle, the concession of private interests at the dictates of a creed, the imperiling of racial ascendancy for the sake of consistency. The same cynicism which had made Disraeli extend the franchise might, it was very evident, lead Bonar Law to any extreme of democratic folly and their elder statesmen to the utmost imaginable limits

of betrayal. Yet, bad as the alternatives might be, the dying Whig supremacy had rested on forces possibly almost as undesirable. The radicalism of the towns and the sanctimony of the suburbs were not only alien in spirit but actively hostile to the coldly indifferent temperament, the private extravagances, the public magnanimity, the grandiloquent detachment of the last of the Whigs. The Radicals had, of course, always wanted their price and the Whig supremacy had always rested on a quiet appreciation of the fact. But their price was getting too high, and the brokers were getting above themselves. The result was that the lawless insolence of the Ulster rebels was given chance after chance of posturing as the guardians of morality.

Society was, as ever, ridiculously unaware of the powerfully and actually revolutionary forces at work in their midst. Society, indeed, went on precisely as it always does, without caring twopence about the future, and it would be quite wrong to imagine Quex blinking out behind his gold-rimmed spectacles at a brilliant world rushing recklessly to its end. The world, then, was just precisely the same as it had been for two generations of commercial expansion, except that things were beginning to be done (with a good bit more spit and rather less polish) by rather peculiar people. Quex was just one of these. Society meant no more to him than to most business men. He had nothing to say, and hated listening. He was quite contented just not to be kicked downstairs, at any rate not down the front stairs. But he had wanted to satisfy himself that there was no catch anywhere, that the limits to

individual enterprise were wholly and finally destroyed. Then he could get on with the business in hand.

The business in hand was, of course, the establishment of Quex's Stores.

It all began with the chemist's daughter. But once it had begun it went on, like her, at an astonishing pace. After a time there was really little else to do except to take the profits.

You remember, perhaps, the first of Quex's Stores, the one in the Bayswater Road. At any rate, that was the first, and it was here that Quex, the clerk, used to buy toothpowder, and an occasional toothbrush or so. Quex, the manager—so superficial are these in class distinctions—used to buy precisely the same, and Quex, the embryo company promoter, never quite gave up the habit. The girl in the case was not, in the early years, a figure of a romance, and Quex's acquaintance with her did not begin, in the Bloomsbury sense, as an affair. It was just that over a period of eight years no change in the temperature had passed without comment: it was almost a relief to her to be able to vary the topic one morning with a brusque "You won't be seeing me here much longer, Mr. Quex."

"Oh, dear me, dear me, this is very sudden," Quex replied. "Are you getting married?"

"Me getting married. . . . I know too much about you men to do a thing like that."

This was, indeed, something new, and Quex waited for his change with ill-concealed curiosity.

"No," she went on, "we've got to clear out. The

lease is up in March, and the landlord is asking double the rent. Father's really angry about it. He says it's all the fault of Lloyd George, but, of course, I don't know anything about that."

Somehow this information struck a chill into Quex. Perhaps the traditional distrust of the bourgeois for the landed interest was working in his jealous little soul, though he was profoundly unaware of having any traditions at all. Perhaps he was just curious, or perhaps the sudden discovery that the girl was a human being threw him off his balance. Anyway he heard himself asking, apparently quite spontaneously, whether there was anything he could do. Then a look in the girl's eyes warned him to be careful. He realized that he had been smiling at her, and that she was, quite unaccountably after eight years, smiling back. This outbreak of humanity had been mutual in some curious way. And her eyes were brighter than usual.

"You see, I've got a scheme on hand which makes me particularly interested in this sort of business, and if your father and I—"

"Oh, my father," she broke off, in a disappointed sort of way, and Quex saw that he had put his foot in it somehow.

"Of course we could talk the thing over a little at first, if you preferred . . . but I'm afraid I must be going now." Her preference was a bit too alluringly expressed to give any hint of the decidedly businesslike conversation he had had in mind.

"Of course I'll speak to my father at once, Mr. Quex. . . . No doubt you'll be passing this way again and I'll tell you what he says."

"Splendid," was Quex's relieved comment on a reply which took him two paces nearer the door and interposed a large green jar between him and his prospective (business) partner. "I'll look in tomorrow morning."

For the first time in his life Quex was puzzled. He didn't usually see far enough to reach this half-way house to middle-class culture, but he saw in this particular case an infernally long vista of complications. He had never in his life dreamt of going into that particular line of country, and still less had he dreamt of founding a career in marriage with a chemist's daughter. Yet he meant to go back. He knew that, and he was proud of it. That was really what worried him. "A man who gives way to a generous instinct," Corrian had once said to him, "cuts himself off at one fell swoop from all the advantages of civilization." It was, indeed, a very naked Quex who walked citywards in the pale February sunshine and failed consistently to bring his curious little suburban thoughts from the golden heaven to the gutter which conceals beneath its slime so much that is more easily convertible into scrip.

This was barely a month after his great coup. It would not have been in Quex to dally, except with an eye to business, even with a blue-eyed blonde during any of those hectic months when he was laying the foundations of his fortune. Now, however, it was in some indefinable way different. He had not formally relinquished his managership, and his agreement had two months to run. But he was no longer interested in the profits. There was, he reflected, at least so much justification for his altruistic incursion into the affairs of the chemist's daughter. But the comfort was

coldish. He had offered to help, and he knew that it might come down to actually helping. What man with eleven thousand in the bank could refuse to help anything as innocent as she was?

But was she? "That," thought Quex, "remains to be seen." But even here his mind, magically suffused with sunshine of a damnably ethereal kind, refused to contemplate a too searching investigation. "Never prove what you can't assume," was Corrian's maxim for these secular affairs, and Quex felt that the genial old scoundrel was, as usual, not far wrong. And he certainly could assume nothing in this enigmatic case except that he had to put his hand into his pocket.

Well, as we all know, Quex went back. And his hand somehow ended up in the chemist's pocket, to the great enrichment of his own. And he didn't marry the girl. What he did was infinitely more original. He threw her in with Quex's Stores when he went to the public for a quarter of a million and got away with it. And it amuses one quite a lot to think of the country parsons and the widows and orphans contributing their savings to the maintenance of Quex's mistress. But I am anticipating.

Once begun, the affair developed pretty rapidly.

"I said you'd come back, Mr. Quex," she said, with an almost malicious brightness, when he went back to the shop at seven o'clock the first evening. "Father says we've no right to take your money, so I think we'd better talk it over first just between us two."

Quex was staggered. The idea of anyone taking his money was bad enough. The idea of talking over the taking of his money with a girl who seemed suddenly,

in a night, to have become confoundedly attractive, was appalling.

"Oh, you do, do you?" was all he could find to say in the desperation of the moment; and then, after a pause, "Won't you begin?"

"Oh! you are funny!" she smiled back, and to Quex's intense discomfiture went on smiling in utter silence.

"Well, we're not getting on very fast at the moment, are we?" Quex tried again, but with no greater success.

"I don't know about that," she answered with something nearer a smirk than a laugh. "You've come back, at any rate."

"Of course I've come back," Quex interjected. "I said I would. But I thought I was going to see your father."

"Do you mind very much?" She came out into the open here, somewhat to Quex's relief; the situation began to dawn on him; but he wasn't sure.

"Not as long as your father doesn't," was his noncommittal answer.

"Oh! Dad trusts me to look after myself . . . besides, this is really in the way of business, isn't it? He always says that makes a difference."

"You mean you'd like to dine with me, and tell me all about it then?"

"Of course I should, but I was only thinking of the pictures."

Such is romance in the Bayswater Road. But it was a more fruitful romance than some even more passionate, for out of it sprang Quex's Stores.

The dinner was an extraordinary affair. Quex turned up in a taxi at eight o'clock as arranged, and finding

the shop closed, rather to his relief, rang the bell at the side door. But he needn't have done it, for she came running down the stairs and almost literally threw herself into his arms, or would have done if Quex hadn't stepped back in time. They drove to the Café Royal and settled down to business, diluted—Quex's unspoken scruples were completely overborne at the first gasp—with champagne.

Quex was at first completely out of his depth. He was quite ready to do anything to preserve his sanity, but the thing still eluded him. There was a preposterous moment over the soup, when he seemed to detect the crude outlines of a blackmailing plot, but her assumption that the only thing to be discussed was the amount of money he was going to give her "as a surprise to dad" made this theory look ridiculous. It was altogether too naïve.

"He says he won't lie down under an obligation, whatever that means, but, of course, he doesn't include me. I can do what I like, can't I?"

"Surely," Quex answered; "that's not only a woman's privilege, but a woman's duty. But are you sure what you *do* like?"

The moment he'd said this he realized what his answer would be, and sure enough it came.

"I rather think I like you . . . just a little."

Was this "Love's Young Dream," or "A Daughter's Sacrifice"? Quex wondered. Both had been showing at the local cinema, but it was hard to say for which part she had cast herself. Was he Romeo or Don Juan? He fancied himself little enough in either rôle.

"Then tell your father I'll go into partnership with

him," Quex countered, "and when he wants to retire, I'll buy him out."

"I think I like you quite a lot," she smiled across the table at him, "but you are funny."

"No funnier than you, my dear," Quex replied, toying with his expensive cigarette case; "but life itself is on the funny side, and we have to keep pace with it."

Suddenly Quex experienced an overwhelming desire to talk business. If there was an understanding between them, there was; but it was important, he felt, to see what else he'd let himself in for. Of course he needn't have gone so far. He realized that; but he had an instinct in these matters, and he suspected, not altogether wrongly, that behind the girl's extraordinary surrender was some tragedy of suppressed vitality which might be turned to good account.

Pursuing this train of thought he asked whether her father was fond of reading.

"How in the world did you guess that? And what's that got to do with you and me? When I want to see anyone like you I always go and stay with an old school friend in the country. She never gives me away."

"And how many people like me—"

"Now don't go and be jealous and spoil it," she said with an almost imploring look, "and besides, this is quite different. Something has got to be done for father; he's nearly seventy, and he can't start all over again at his age. He's rather an old pet, you know."

Quex experienced the most positive sense of relief he had ever known. The affair was shedding its embarrassing texture of romance at a satisfying pace. And he had really committed himself to nothing, except a

week-end at Brighton—or perhaps Hastings was safer. But he wouldn't allow himself to be hurried.

They lingered over dinner and then went on to a box at the Gaiety. The box was an inspiration, and as the piece was half over when they arrived, he could maintain expectations at the requisite pitch. His only concern was the father. She didn't seem to realize that he was serious in his project of a business partnership, but the fact was that as the evening wore on he came rapidly to the conclusion that this was the most promising aspect of an affair which was in other ways less extraordinary because less flattering to his vanity than he had feared.

Her idea of the affair became only too crystal-clear. It had begun, he realized now, with an entrancing vision of a private room furnished in the best cinema style, and it ended presumably with the receipt of a check and a more prolonged vista of week-ends at expensive hotels with a positive stream of checks for possibly larger sums. On such a theory, it was only too clear why there was no need for him to be jealous, but it was less clear how her father's declining years were to be relieved from anxiety. Had he been made a fool of? Was there no father, no landlord, nothing but the girl, of whose existence there was no possible doubt at the moment? Seen through a haze of champagne, the affair looked unpromising, but he clung to the receding image of the bespectacled chemist threatened with ruin, and was not to be denied.

"Of course you shall have a talk to father . . . but you must be discreet . . . he wouldn't take a penny if he even guessed."

Quex was relieved. Whether this was true or not didn't worry him, for he had by now a shrewd idea that the old man wasn't going to get the chance of very many pennies. But he had got another idea, and he wanted to try it out.

"A partnership is the thing," he said finally, "and when we've fixed it up we can enjoy ourselves."

Never in his brief career had the ingenious Quex done anything more wholly successful than this maneuver. Like all great men he had followed his instincts, which had led him rapidly but not too decisively to the verge of what seemed by now a predestined episode. She was too excited to be playing a part; she was dazzled and a little drunk, but her uneven mind had its dreams and one of them was on the brink of realization. To be the mistress of a millionaire is perhaps less romantic than to be seduced by a peer, but on the material side it has its advantages. She was in the mood to deny herself none of them. And so in the darkened theater, with pleasantly seductive music sounding softly in his ears with almost indecent monotony, Quex laid the foundations of one of the most successful commercial enterprises of modern times. Unconsciously, perhaps! But there was nothing unconscious about his stoical preference for completing the business end of the affair before embarking on an expensive liaison. That was Quex in his nakedness. And Quex got his way. Of course he had to pay for it, but the change from a week-end at Brighton to a fortnight at Deauville was clearly justifiable as the substitution of a serious investment for a cheaper but hazardous speculation.

Oddly enough, the elusive father turned out on in-

vestigation to be very much the bespectacled recluse of Quex's hopes. The old man was a typical dabbler, and he gave to the business only the scanty hours which he thought right to spare from his treatise on the laws of health, and the fuddled perusal of vegetarian tracts, theosophist pamphlets, bimetalist propaganda, and the works of Mr. Norman Angell.

"You cannot cure evil by evil," was his pet phrase, which provided him with a completely satisfying exposure of every important axiom of science or politics. "I shan't live to see it," was another of his key remarks, "but there's a new spirit growing up which will fight on the side of the Light." The poor old man's mind was, of course, only a rubbish heap, but he had a pathetic earnestness which was not without dignity, and an innate refinement which made bargaining abhorrent. A poor business man, but none the worse for that. And as far as Quex was concerned, infinitely the better for it.

He made, it turned out (his daughter in the intervals of her agricultural week-ends kept the books tolerably well), just a few hundreds a year, without allowing for the rent or his own wages. Now his rent was to be put up from £60 per annum to £180 per annum, and he was in despair. He lived for his books, his writing, and his daughter's happiness. He simply couldn't face the necessity for dismissing their one servant, looking after the shop himself and turning his daughter into a household drudge. "She wasn't born to it," he kept on saying, "she wasn't born to it."

All this, of course, Quex got from the old man himself. Quex soon saw that as the hand of Providence, interposed between the radiant refinement of the girl

who wasn't born to work and the hard necessity of cooking the dinner, he stood in a very strong position. And the old dotard, who knew a little less than Quex about the price of silk, actually thought he was paying for his daughter's clothes.

Quex's proposals were simple, manly and straightforward.

"Your profits," he said, after the position had been explained to him at inordinate length, "aren't real profits. You allow nothing for your own services and nothing for your daughter's. This isn't fair to yourselves."

"Well, Mr. Quex," old Samson answered, "of course you know best, but a profit's a profit, and what I make over and above what I spend is what I call an honest profit. . . . Some profits aren't honest . . . profits out of armaments for instance, or profits out of drink that corrupts the souls of the people and leads them against the Light. But medicine—provided, sir, it's good, wholesome, old-fashioned medicine—is what I call honest goods."

"Of course, of course, Mr. Samson," Quex interrupted with an indulgent beam, "but what I mean is that if we are to be partners we must pay you for the work you do, otherwise when we come to divide the profits it wouldn't be fair."

"Call it what you like, Mr. Quex; but a profit's a profit."

"Well, well," Quex smiled, "we won't quarrel. I'm not a reading man like you. Let's get down to figures. Your stock, you say, is worth £1,200, and you turn it over three times a year. We'll pay you as a salary £350

a year, and your daughter £100 a year, and you'll pay me the rent that you pay at present. And you take 25 per cent. of the profits for seven years."

Samson made laborious calculations on the cuff of his shirt.

"But that gives me more than I get at present. Nearly a hundred a year more," the old man croaked incredulously, after a few moments.

"Of course it does," Quex explained patiently. "But that's what you want. You see I can wait for my profit. You can't. After seven years I shall be quite ready to get my money back, and make a little more, perhaps. After all, we're all business men, Mr. Samson."

"I am a tradesman and proud of it, Mr. Quex," the old man put in, rather unexpectedly. "I don't hold with this modern talk about commerce. Black's black and white's white, to my notion."

"I wish everyone understood that as well as you do, Mr. Samson. My proposal is not one, as a matter of fact, which I'd make to anyone but you. I hope you understand that."

"If you don't think it's fair, Mr. Quex, don't make it, I pray you. I won't lie down under an obligation to anyone; nor will my daughter."

"Father always says that, Mr. Quex," Rose interrupted, with an intimate look, "and I always say it sounds so disobliging. But you know we don't mean it that way."

"My dear Mr. Samson," Quex replied, "my offer is my offer. I've made it and I hold to it. It's there to be accepted or refused, as you think best in your interests."

"That's plain speaking, Mr. Quex, and I flatter myself I can still understand plain speaking," Samson answered with an air of visible relief. "Rose and I will talk it over—we always talk everything over: we've no secrets from each other—and let you know."

"Splendid," Quex ejaculated with a sudden effusion of admiration for this household so discreetly embodying the Victorian ideals; "and now I must say good-by."

"Won't you stay to supper, Mr. Quex?" Rose asked with dutiful resignation.

But Quex had had enough, and with a beaming smile went off to dine by himself at Gatti's. The old fool would sign—Rose, with her eye on Deauville, would see to that.

And Quex, as he sipped his port, saw a vivid and kindling vision of thousands of bespectacled old men musing fuddled dreams of progress behind the counters of chemists' shops all over England—all over the world for that matter—and all waiting to hand their destinies and their daughters over to Quex for just nothing at all. There were, he had discovered, roughly 20,000 chemists' shops, and the Registrar-General's figures of age groups suggested that there must be something like 600 of these chemists over 65 and nearly 2,000 between 55 and 65. Some at least of these must be in their dotage. Quex went on to his brandy.

CHAPTER FOUR

THAT the preposterous adventure of the chemist's daughter should actually have been the foundation of Quex's Stores was perhaps superficially an exception to the rule that the only road to success in business is service to the public. The time was certainly still far distant when Quex was used to saying, in his frank and simple way, that the service of the national health had called him from his earliest boyhood, and that in his heart he was glad of it because he felt that, unremunerative though it was by comparison with other businesses, the pleasure of relieving suffering, somewhere, somehow, at every hour of the day, was an abiding source of gratification. It must indeed be frankly admitted that he was not as sensitive at this time to the immense benefits conferred by retail chemists on the community as he afterwards became. This is only to say, however, that great men mature late. Julius Cæsar was not consul till he was 42, and Quex was not a confessed philanthropist till after the Great War, nor did he realize, till the K.B.E. was conferred on him for his services as an intermediary between our brave lads at the front and the medical requisites of which they were so sadly in need, that the desire to help suffering had, subconsciously, been the mainspring of his activities for many years. Yet it is not impos-

sible that Quex might have suffered the embarrassment of acquiring his code of business ethics before he acquired his business but for his friendship with Dr. Corrian. Corrian was actually seriously afraid of Quex's ingenuous mentality. To counter it, he took at all their business talks the strongest possible line. He was particularly annoyed when Quex soon after his fortnight with Rose at Deauville told him the details of his contract with the Samsons, and how he saw a chance of making money out of it.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," the old savage had grunted. "Samson'll make the money. You'll take it from him."

"But, surely, if you make a success in business you're adding to the wealth of the community," Quex had answered, with, even in these early days, a trace of virtuous indignation.

But Corrian was not so easily convinced. "A man who believes that," was all he said for a moment, "will believe anything." After a minute or two he went on, almost fervently:

"Can't you see, my dear fellow, that the only man who creates wealth is the producer of goods or the purveyor of services, but nine-tenths of the producers and ninety-nine out of every hundred public servants die poor. The successful business man is not the man who supplies, but the man who has the power to withhold goods and services, except of course on his own terms. And the more absolute that power is the richer he is. It's very simple, my dear Quex, and very sad! But there it is."

I doubt if Corrian really believed this high-brow

fallacy. But he had a purpose in dinning it into the unwilling ears of Quex, because he knew Quex's weakness. Quex never understood the very A B C of practical business. Of him it was literally true that his success came not from making but from taking. It was the thing for which he had a genius, and Corrian, who wanted a share of the loot and saw his chance of getting it, was genuinely alarmed lest Quex's energies should be sidetracked into any form of productive activity, for which he was utterly unfitted, and at which he would have been utterly incompetent. And Corrian's alarm at Quex's love of pietistic humbug was at least equally genuine. A conscious humbug may get away with it, as we all know, but a man who deceives himself may well lose that delicate touch, that sense of actuality (to use Quex's own phrase) which is necessary to the undetected manipulation of facts and figures and to the remunerative employment of other people's brains and money—which is necessary, in a word, to the proper solution of all those problems which weigh on the shoulders of financiers.

It is thus to Corrian's credit that Quex retained his sense of actuality long enough to reach the House of Lords. In the end Quex came, as his recent speeches show, to realize with the profoundest conviction that the essence of salesmanship is altruism and the essence of money-making the capacity to serve the public good without thought of self. But that his tendency to the higher morality of commerce never cost him a penny during the great years of his activity was largely due to Corrian, who stood by him with a cynical smile and talked naked facts without a blush. It was also due

in great measure to Corrian that by 1911 Quex was proprietor of no fewer than one hundred chemists' shops.

Corrian came in almost from the start, because his medical knowledge was invaluable in assessing the character of the trade and the quality of the stock. He could, moreover, approach potential vendors rather as a professional colleague than as a business man. The purchase of the Bayswater shop marked the high-water of Quex's generosity as a purchaser, and a mere fifty pounds or so to relieve some pressing financial obligation, or just, in Quex's pet phrase, "to sweeten 'em a bit," had often been all that was necessary to bait the trap. The trap, of course, was the guaranteed salary and a proportion of the profits for a number of years. The proportions varied. Once when there were no profits the proportion had been fixed as high as 90 per cent. In only a few cases had the proportion been less than 25 per cent. There was one sad case where the proprietor was dying—if not actually dead—when he signed the agreement; here a small pension to the widow for five years, till her son came of age, seemed more appropriate, and Quex, with becoming sympathy, himself paid the funeral expenses.

Again, there was a case where Corrian, going to a chemist's shop in Bath, was served with a drug listed on the poison schedule but was not asked for his signature. It was characteristic that Quex refused to give information to the police—a course which would have involved the young chemist in what would, it is true, have been only a nominal fine but in a measure of notoriety which might have been disastrous, in his

view, to a rising young retailer—but the hypothetical loss of good-will was certainly reflected in the terms of sale. Another case where the chemist's son was assisted out of England by Quex's munificence led to a transaction as creditable to British good faith as it would have been distasteful, had all the facts been known, to the Low-church conscience. For no mention of the true consideration figured in the deed of sale, which was, however, scrupulously honored on both sides. As a matter of fact Quex refused to take any credit for his share in this particular transaction. "Any other business man would have done the same," he modestly observed.

These little human tragedies were, however, the exception. Corrian's missionary enthusiasm, working up and down the country, planted in the minds of the majority of the more senile chemists merely a passionate love of ease and the rewards of a lifetime's enterprise. That quiet fireside in the suburb, the winter mornings in bed till ten o'clock—not, as Corrian observed, that there was anything actually wrong in a summer morning in bed till the same hour—long walks in the country on fresh spring afternoons, reveries in the fading August twilight, the dank charm of the woods in autumn—all these sylvan and other delights were conjured up with amazing perspicacity by the peripatetic old abortionist as he toured England from Land's End to John o' Groats in search of the thousand most tired, most needy and most foolish among the chemists of the greatest Empire on which the sun has ever set.

From the start, almost, the shops had begun to earn

at least a nominal profit. From a small office in lower Regent Street Quex organized the whole intricate affair with masterly simplicity, while Corrian, on a small salary and a handsome commission on the difference between the amount a business was worth and the amount for which it was bought, toured the country night and day, bringing fresh fish into the net.

A slight increase in selling prices, a heavy reduction in expenses as a result of collective buying under long-dated contracts, an active development of the trade in expensive soaps, powders and beauty preparations, accompanied by the first faint murmur of that memorable "Health and Beauty" propaganda which played such havoc with the morals of shop assistants and girl clerks in the hectic years of the post-war debacle . . . all this made just enough difference even at the start to insure that every shop put a hundred or two into Quex's pocket in the first year.

Soon other factors began to operate. Some of the more senile chemists began to die. The cold winter of 1910 killed off quite a number, and the engagement of smart young assistants at half the salary guaranteed under the purchase agreement increased the profits amazingly.

Again, Quex had been careful to acquire businesses only in places which were improving as residential districts. Sometimes this improvement was rapid, and in most cases it was steady.

Of course Quex made mistakes. Characteristically enough, the one business which never brought him a farthing in the first three years was old Samson's, and the added liability of Samson's exacting daughter made

the transaction look, from an accountant's point of view, rather absurd.

Quex had been soon bored by the blond assiduity of his conquest, and finally he decided to cut his losses and install the girl as his secretary at his own office. It cost him £150 per annum to replace her in the shop, but the new arrangement gave her a status which made her clothes and her tastes less open to investigation. Incidentally she created a good impression among visitors to his office and she acquired a host of friends who relieved him from some part of a burden which was becoming irksome. The change provided the opportunity, moreover, for the first move in that wholly delightful maneuver already mentioned, for it was at this juncture that he made a skilful life contract with his new secretary, and instructed his lawyer to devote all his resources to the elimination of any possible flaw in the agreement. His lawyer confessed to being a bit rusty in this branch of practice, and Quex good-naturedly offered to pay the costs of counsel's opinion if that would insure the agreement not being made in common form. Whether these extreme measures were actually employed, I don't know, but the fact remains that alone among all the agreements to come under consideration in 1920 when the great Quex Combine was launched on the public, Quex's and this girl's agreements were the only ones which proved in fact to be wholly without a loophole. But there was another clause in the agreement which Quex at the time, and perhaps rightly, regarded as even more masterly. The agreement was void on marriage within five years

of signature. Quex's Victorian views rebelled against the modern habit of marrying one's mistress.

With his office, his shops, his secretary, and Corrian as the linchpin, Quex's chariot was now fairly launched. He was not making as much as he was spending, and as far as hard cash went he was a poorer man than before Rose's seductive charms had caught his roving eye on a cold February morning two years before. But the difference was that he had what he called "an organization." Quex had an intuitive appreciation of the potentialities of "an organization." Income meant little to him, immediately realizable assets not very much. "An organization" was for him something spiritually distinct spelling content for its owner, because it spelled the power to call ceaselessly on the labor of others, the time of others, the brains of others, and, if necessary, on their souls too. A godlike position indeed. And like other twentieth century gods Quex was prepared to toil, but not to spin; to manipulate, not to create; to take commissions, not to earn a wage or even a salary.

The risk which he shouldered with sanctimony in public troubled him in private not at all, if only because it didn't exist. Quex had just discovered that. It had come to him almost suddenly, and as a revelation almost divine. As if God had spoken to God . . . for Quex had had a vision.

He had seen himself with feverish activity hurrying all over Willesden buying up butchers, drapers, bakers, tailors, milliners, stationers, even a few bookshops. With reckless profusion, he had poured out ink on

agreement after agreement. Once he had written a post-dated check.

It was at this point that the sickening anxiety of dreamland entered into his soul. What if the whole of the vast commitment proved unproductive? Suppose it never paid a dividend. Suppose he went bankrupt and had to earn his own living! At this point he began to wake up. And here came the moment of revelation. For he didn't wake to the realization, as you or I would have, that he hadn't really bought the businesses and therefore need not worry. He woke up saying to himself, with the profound relief of a great man escaping from a nightmare: "After all, I never paid anything appreciable for any of them." And when he was really awake he experienced a cold chill of disillusion because he hadn't really got the business after all.

It was under the inspiration of this golden dream that Quex decided in the late summer of 1913 on the first substantial development of his activities. In other words, the time had come, "to offer to a few of my friends and associates the chance of active cooperation in an undertaking of a particularly promising character."

His earlier activities in connection with the Boscombe Silk Syndicate stood him here in good stead. He had been careful to exact on that occasion (in response for his good offices in obtaining the controlling interest for his old friend James Robinson) a seat on the Board of Lexington Mills Limited, of which Robinson's father was chairman, managing director, and, moreover, the principal shareholder. He was not foolish enough to suppose that a dummy directorship, for-

tified by the holding of one fully paid share in the company, would buy him anything directly either in cash or credit, but he took longer views than poor old-fashioned old Dick Robinson, who expressed his contempt for directors in general and Quex in particular in no uncertain terms.

"These City-trained men don't know the A B C of business," he used to say to his Bradford friends in the Conservative Club; "they've lived soft and they'll die soft. Directors, indeed! I'd like to know what they direct."

And so he would, very much indeed. But it was just here that soft young Quex had the advantage of him. For he knew that he was directing, by infinitely quiet maneuvers, the money of the Bradford manufacturers into his own extremely capacious pocket.

For four years he had attended every board meeting with ridiculous regularity. But his work began earlier and ended later. His fellow directors were of two kinds. Three were representatives of important interests, importers, merchants and machinery manufacturers, and were there simply to look after themselves. The others were dummies like himself, nominees of old Robinson, and were there to look after his interests. They had good salaries in the business and had no intention of losing them. When, periodically, the time came for revising agreements, or settling commissions, their ready support was accorded on grounds of the highest and most disinterested character. "The laborer is worthy of his hire," was a crisp epigram often heard on these occasions, or, alternatively, "There is nothing so shortsighted as false economy."

Quex took a different line. "In the South," he used to say sometimes—he had constituted himself with, as a matter of fact, no little psychological acumen, the mouthpiece of the South—"a man who had done what our chairman had done would be drawing four times what he does; but then in the South we don't expect hard work from anyone."

This pleased everyone except the shareholders, but then the shareholders seldom, as all boards of directors know, take a long view.

It is clear, indeed, that Quex soon showed himself as capable of striking the right note in Bradford as in London. He made in fact only one mistake, at an early meeting, when he tried the elsewhere unfailing gambit—an increase in salary for an employee was under consideration.

"Fifty years ago men were proud of working successfully. Nowadays a man thinks he deserves a bonus for not being a downright failure."

The criticism—by no means unjust within Quex's experience—fell flat. That fatal generation of spenders and wasters had not grown up in Bradford. It was still in its cradle. Yet even this premature pronouncement on the shortcomings of his contemporaries did him no direct harm. And his lunches and dinners did him a power of good.

Always, every month of the year, his talk was the same. Health was the problem of the future. "The interests I control," was his formula for his half-dozen shops in 1911, and for his hundred shops in January, 1913, and the immense potentialities of these interests, if their development was aided by the really energetic

backing of practical men, were unfolded without, as events showed, any trace of exaggeration.

At last in the summer of 1913 Quex calculated that the bait was sufficiently attractive and the fish sufficiently excited to swallow it. It was his first private and individual effort at company promoting, but students of finance will find little to quarrel with in a venture which ended by making Quex a captain of industry and his shareholders the proud owners of a 20 per cent investment. It is indeed a vulgar and socialistic error to suppose that a company promoter can promote for his own profit only. Money, like other good things, has to be bought, and it comes in full measure only to those able and willing to pay the full price. No man was ever readier than Artemas Quex. Even in the Bubuland panic it is only fair to remember, as Quex has done, that the people who were ruined were those who sold their shares to him when the crisis came. No one who stood fast lost a penny.

In the case of Quex's Stores the problem was, from the company promoter's point of view, an extremely simple one. Quex had acquired in stock, premises and good-will assets worth at least £20,000, and he had paid barely £10,000 for them. The new company was to be capitalized at £40,000, and Quex was to sell his properties for 20,000 fully paid shares and a life agreement at a salary of £2,000 a year and a lavish percentage of the profits. The new money was to be spent in acquiring by the same inconspicuous maneuvers £40,000 worth of new assets for half that sum in cash expenditure.

Those unused to the subtleties of finance may be forgiven if they wonder why, if assets so tangible as

chemists' shops can be bought for half what they are worth, there are any among us who are so shortsighted as to die poor. The answer is simple. In the first place, for twenty people who can sell something for twice what they paid for it (though indeed these same twenty will be only twenty out of every thousand) there is but one who can buy something for less than it is worth. In the second place, to a man tired of life, worn out by sickness, or harassed by domestic economy, a small sum of money may seem large. "To him," as Quex used to say, "it *is* large; it is the feelings of the seller which a business man must consider, not those of any long-haired doctrinaire." In the third place, the buyer is, *ex hypothesi,* a better man than the seller. What he buys, therefore, actually *becomes* more valuable than it was. And lastly there are, as in all forms of warfare, the vital principles of concentration and surprise which necessarily operate for the buyer against the seller when one is an individual in difficulties, the other an organization pursuing a calculated campaign, able to wait for its moments and its men. How many of us after all have ever set out systematically to buy anything? When a shirtmaker gets into difficulties it is not the clerk in Brixton fighting for respectability at the price of health and happiness who buys up the stock at a fifth of what he would have to pay for it in the shops. The bargain goes to the man who has the buying organization and can exploit immediately and temptingly the needs of a man threatened with ruin. The men to whom Quex was offering the unprecedented opportunity of financing his enterprise knew all this as

second nature. The chemists did not. That is the simple and subtle secret of the early growth of Quex's Stores.

Not, of course, that they were to be known yet under that inspiring name. Far from it. The great purple and gold shop fronts, the illuminated signs which make Quex's Stores a beacon light in all the principal towns of England were non-existent at this time. Not in one single case had the name of a shop been changed, and for a very good reason. Long leases had to be arranged everywhere on the most favorable terms possible, and when this was impossible, alternative premises had to be acquired. Everywhere this was done locally, and without a hint of any new proprietorship; still less of a combine operating from London. Even the trade knew little, since to the wholesalers Quex represented himself in the capacity of a retailer's agent, not of a proprietor. His very note-heading bore the inscription "Agent for Drugs, Medical Stores and Toilet Requisites."

This secrecy was still to be maintained. The great coup needed another three years to mature, but the foundations were well and securely laid.

Quex's offer "to a few of my friends" brought a host of inquiries, but at first not a single offer of cash. The scheme was too vague, the assets too hypothetical, the entire absence of anything in the nature of a valuation of stock too suspicious. But nevertheless the bait had been swallowed. Quex's explanatory letter, giving auditors' certificates, valuers' certificates, copies of agreements, copies of leases, of every conceivable

document, relevant or irrelevant, was ready to go out on the day when the first vaguely phrased epistle reached those warm-hearted but suspicious friends.

There was also a third letter, also all ready to go out, and dated just three days later, announcing that Messrs. Squirrel and Leather, the well-known manufacturing druggists, had offered to take up shares to the value of £10,000 and that other offers must be received by return of post. The letter did not make it clear, it must be admitted, that Messrs. Squirrel and Leather had obtained one of those informal assurances which are the mainspring of commercial enterprise in regard to the destination of the contract for supplying Quex's shops, nor was it disclosed—why need it have been?—that Quex had informally accepted the liability to buy back the shares at par within five years if called upon to do so.

In fact, as Quex remarked to Corrian, the whole purpose of the letter might have been jeopardized had these very informal understandings been disclosed; and this, Quex added, would have meant a severe setback to a great experiment in intensive merchandising, besides in all human probability throwing many helpless people out of employment.

"Nonsense," Corrian had commented with his usual assumption of superior understanding. "All that would have happened is that a few of the less senile chemists would have stuck to their profits or sold their businesses to someone else."

"But think of the loss of efficiency, my dear Corrian, in all these two hundred businesses operating their

miserable little transactions in the spirit of the parish pump."

"Oh, yes, I am thinking hard about it," Corrian replied with a laugh. "I don't for a moment suggest that you're doing any positive harm, and as long as I get my share of the profits I shan't complain. But don't tell me that when we start our big campaign in three years' time and spend thousands inducing typists and shop assistants to waste their last farthing on face cream and lip stick instead of taking the train into the country or buying a book to read, we shall be doing a national service; I don't believe it."

Corrian, as we have said, made a point of talking in this strain, and Quex tired of it a good deal. It was to his rather shop-soiled mind quite genuinely "obvious" that no one would buy anything he didn't want and that the man who stepped up (or even down, if it were necessary) and supplied what was wanted was doing a service. He was at last coming seriously to regard his unfailing ingenuity in finance as a public asset. He could secure the cooperation of money and brains in the public service on terms genuinely advantageous to himself and his backers. Whether the transaction was also advantageous to the brains he employed or to the public whom he professed to serve was not in his view worth arguing. His service was to his shareholders, and to himself. The rest could look after themselves. That at least was the case for Quex, as Dick Livingstone saw it in the years of their association.

And the case against him?

Well, I should not be writing this amid the scents of my friend's Italian garden if it were not for that, so I can honestly be grateful that, as things turned out, it was pretty damning.

For Quex got his money—every penny of it and a little more—and he also got Dick Livingstone.

CHAPTER FIVE

DICK LIVINGSTONE, of all unlikely people, was actually a relation of Quex's. "A relation by marriage," he was always careful to explain, but the fact remains, and his entry into Quex's orbit was not quite so paradoxical as he liked, being a good Whig, to pretend.

Livingstone had retired from the Army as a junior captain in 1906 and had been leading a roving life for the intervening seven years. He said that he wrote for the papers, though some of us could never quite discover where or what, and he certainly dabbled in politics and had even contested a seat in the Tory interest in the 1910 election. But he was not a creative spirit, and it was, though he would almost certainly have denied it, a quite simple desire for a larger income and nothing in the least noble or idealistic which sent him into Quex's office in 1913 to watch the new world at first hand and to play his part in the making of it.

The phrase, as a matter of fact, is mine, not his. Dick wasn't quite prepared at that time to admit that there was a new world, and of course it is arguable that the popular view, which lays on the war the blame for so much that is of ill repute in our present-day world, is correct. Fundamentally, however, Livingstone already took the other view. He regarded his

association with Quex not as a business or even as a job, but purely and solely as an adventure. And it was an adventure of which the intimate warnings of his conscience were inclined even from the first to disapprove.

I remember once, when he had been with Quex only a month or two, trying to set his doubts at rest. My point was the old one; that human nature is always the same, that it was simply a case of new times, new manners, but I can remember still Dick's petulant interruption.

" 'New times, no manners,' you mean. But isn't the matter at least equally different? New men in old houses, old furniture in new rooms, new parties wearing old labels, destructive ideas masquerading under the thin disguise of historic forces. Why, if you get down to it, the matter has changed more than the manner. It's an age of appearances."

"But isn't that our strength?" I remember asking, still playing devil's advocate. "As a nation we never change too quickly to lose continuity, but we always change sufficiently to avoid revolution."

"Any fool can change with the times," Livingstone interrupted me again in his oddly enthusiastic way, "but culture, civilization, morality, ἦθος, whatever you like to call it, isn't relative, it's absolute. You either have it and keep it or you have it and lose it, or you never have it at all. The decay of Protestantism, the decline of Greece, the agony of Rome, the corruption of Spain, the collapse of empire after empire in the East, what were all these things due to, but that fatal

facility for change which the damned fools of every generation call progress? Progress where? or, even more fundamentally, progress whence? What about Wordsworth's clouds of glory? I suppose they're changing too, with the times, and that the bright Edwardian baby comes trailing back numbers of the Daily Mail from Carmelite House and that the light of culture opens over the growing newspaper reader."

"You're a Whig at heart, Dick," I said laughing.

"Of course I'm a Whig," Livingstone said, cheering up immediately—he always became appropriately cynical when Whigs were mentioned. "A grand tradition, the Whig rule, with two great secrets. They say what they like because they don't care a damn for anyone, and they get their orders carried out because they never employ subordinates for whom anyone cares a damn. Privilege and Place. Those are the only begetters of efficiency."

"The French revolutionists didn't think so," I ventured to remark.

"Of course not, but there was a reason for it, and a justification. The French aristocracy took their privileges and declined their responsibilities. The only parallel to the French aristocracy are the French hotelkeepers."

Yet for all his Whiggism, Livingstone wasn't prepared in 1913 to face the possibility that the days of a landed aristocracy had gone forever and that in a country utterly intolerant of any form of equality, the financial impresarios who were now at the top might fashion the next few generations to a new pattern. It

was, indeed, Livingstone's reluctance to realize this which was responsible for his personal share in the tragedy.

I suppose he was blinded by prejudice. "Quex is quite a decent fellow," he said to me, "but he couldn't hold down the tiniest job in the public service. He's only trying to make a bit of money, and good luck to him."

"But suppose he makes a lot of money, and suppose all the others who are doing the same thing begin setting fashions instead of following them . . . supposing instead of being merely bad form, they become good form . . . supposing instead of relaxing our standards of taste we lose them . . . then, according to your philosophy, if change is so fatal . . ."

"Then we're finished," Dick said with unusual decision. But then, after a pause, he shook his head. "I can't think it'll come to that."

But of course that was just what it did come to. We lost not only our social but, as the inevitable result, our intellectual standards also. After the war "enlightened views" became the order of the day. It wasn't that the new men and women were incompetent. Some of their stuff was first-class, technically. But it was almost invariably pernicious. And if you put the point to one of them they just said: "Pernicious! What do you mean?" They couldn't see that religion without dogma, nationality without patriotism, levity without humor, idealism without hope, are in their nature destructive. No one minds an anarchist without a bomb, or a soldier with a rifle, but a soldier without a rifle facing an anarchist with a bomb and protesting

loudly that the fellow is only an enlightened policeman is either ridiculous or obscene.

Only one great writer kept his head and castigated "the vulgar refinement of modern thought" incapable of understanding forces inherent "in the very nature of men and things." But the challenge was just ignored.

If Livingstone had challenged Quex, would the result in that small corner of the battlefield have been any more decisive?

Livingstone's first impression of Quex was very vivid. He had, of course, seen the great Artemas in his schoolboy days, and had, like all the family, an oppressive recollection of those Sunday lunches in Queen's Gate when Uncle John used to entertain even the worst of his relations to roast beef, family gossip and indifferent port circulated with a benignantly deprecating air. "I suppose I oughtn't to offer you this," he used to say on every such occasion, "but as it's Sunday . . ."

But Artemas as a short and rather grubby schoolboy, always out-at-elbows and never saying a word, was a very different proposition to the prosperously complacent Quex, combining the confidential manner of a G.P. in a good suburban practice with the ingratiating air of a salesman in Selfridge's shop. Yet this isn't quite a fair description, for Quex had what can only be called a quality of "bedrock" about him. He was Quex, and so far from minding your knowing it, he wanted you to know it. He could pretend to views he didn't hold—no one better—but he never

wanted to pretend to anyone that he was anything but a man on the make. That little bit of him was genuine. Every penny he made he counted with as much pride, and incidentally as much reason for pride, as a collector of furniture counts his "pieces" (as I believe they call them in Maida Vale).

Yes, Quex had his pride. His morals were certainly loose, but he never pretended that there was anything "enlightened" about adultery, or that the possession of a mistress was a reaching-out to a fuller and freer life. His views, indeed, were often astonishingly sound. True, art was the only intellectual interest which he even professed, and even here his interest didn't go beyond an occasional visit to the Leicester Galleries in their more conservative moments. But pacifism, communism, psycho-analysis, bolshevism, bimetalism, inflationism, spiritualism, and all the other fads and fancies of the apostles of enlightenment, left Quex not only cold, but actively hostile. If he was a charlatan, which one can hardly deny, he was at any rate not a charlatan of any of these particular kinds. He could deceive others, himself he could not deceive. If his ruses, his ingratiations (if the word be allowed), his salesman's manner, his assumption of a superior knowledge placed at your service out of sheer benevolence, were obviously insincere, his fundamental sincerity about himself was definite and unmistakable.

That was his secret. Only once did anyone send a shaft through that granite skin of self-esteem, and then Quex was shaken to the depths. His self-esteem was very dear to him and, as we shall see, the man who attacked it took his life in his hands.

But if Quex was strong in some ways, Livingstone always felt that he wasn't big. Physically, he was finely built, nearly six feet high, inclined to fat, but in very tolerable condition for an office-wallah, and altogether quite presentable. Spiritually he was negligible. Livingstone felt that here was a man who would get what he wanted; he felt just a little doubtful if he knew what he wanted; he felt absolutely certain that what he wanted was of no conceivable importance to anyone. Quex was quite capable of shutting the gates of mercy on mankind, but he was not after a throne, or even an "industrial ideal."

Livingstone, of course, was at a disadvantage from the very first because he had no single qualification for the job of secretary to Quex's company except a desire to make money out of business. Quex, however, was geniality itself when they first discussed his appointment.

"Well, you want to mix yourself with this devilish, unpleasant struggle for the scraps of fat left on the bones after the British workman has had his mid-day meal, which we call business? Is that it? Well, I never. . . . However, there's no accounting for tastes, and I dare say I can find something for you to do. But there's not much money to be made out of chemists' shops, old chap—people too damned healthy—"

"That doesn't sound quite right from you," Livingstone ventured to interrupt; but it was difficult to get a word in edgeways with Quex when he scented a demand for a higher salary than he meant to give—Dick got to know the symptoms later.

"Oh, my dear Dick, you mustn't expect me to keep

up to your principles. It's all right for you. You've only got to sit in an office and keep me out of jail, and you can recite the Ten Commandments every day in public if you like . . . but I've got to get down to the business of stimulating the public demand and then supplying it. I'm the linchpin in the great machine which we call modern civilization; I must be given a little license. . . . Surely, surely."

"Oh, I wasn't criticizing, Quex," Livingstone answered—the cousins had drawn the line at Artemas thirty years ago—"but I was only interested at getting a peep behind the scenes. . . . This is all new territory to me . . . outside the radius."

"Well, my dear fellow, I hope you'll like the job more than I do. Plenty of work, and damned little pay, that's my experience. And just as one's responsibilities get bigger, some fellow gets up and says one's profiteering. . . . I hope you're not one of those hymn-singing humbug mongers."

"Meaning?" Livingstone asked, trying to conceal a smile: it was too ridiculous to hear this sort of Daily Mail talk from a grown man with a bank balance.

"Oh, well, perhaps you're another of them," Quex parried, with the air of a man refusing to be drawn into an argument with a precocious schoolboy. And after a pause: "I suppose we'd better get to business."

"Well, I'm quite ready," Livingstone told him.

And then had the surprise of his life. Quex actually had the cheek to offer him £4 a week!

"Frankly, Quex," he said, "I don't see where the business comes in as far as I'm concerned. Can you

give me a single reason why I should sit down and work for you night and day for £200 a year?"

Was he taken aback? Not a bit of it. He came up bold as brass and increased his figure to £7, and when Livingstone laughed Quex laughed too.

"What do you really want?" he asked with an immense air of beneficent patience.

Livingstone told him, with as much appearance of good humor as he could manage, and rather hoped he'd refuse. It wasn't, of course, that he cared how much he got, in one sense, but, as he put it, "the man was such a fool not to see that a fellow might work for nothing when he couldn't take the wage of a junior clerk." However, Quex agreed at once, and having done so, cut short the interview with the characteristic complaint that he'd "got to set to and earn the money to pay you with."

"No chance of my doing that, then?" Livingstone asked as he went out. But Quex just smiled.

The preliminaries over, Livingstone was quickly installed in the offices of the new "Drug Supply Company, Ltd." with Quex's mistress as his daily confidant. It was from her that he got his first insight into the origins of this extraordinary business, though she told no one very much and Livingstone only got the full details by picking Quex's brain in scanty intervals of leisure.

For they worked hard.

What made the work, and especially Livingstone's, so difficult was that among all the good things in which Quex disbelieved there was just one bad thing, and that

was "efficiency." An up-to-date business man would have fitted those hundred chemists' shops into a huge machine in three months, with a system of weekly returns on Form A, fortnightly returns on Form A, and monthly returns on Form B. Every agreement would have been in the same form and negotiated through the same solicitor, and all that would have been necessary for the directors and secretary to do would have been to call up new capital periodically to pay the wages of the clerical staff and to acquire new businesses systematically to swell the cash returns and keep the window dressed for the half-yearly reports. Quex was not that type of fool, by any means. He would not have a clerical staff; he would not have uniformity; he refused to centralize his accounting system, and every single business had been acquired through local solicitors, and every lease through the local house agent.

He made his shops buy from the wholesalers with whom he had contracts, of course, but they bought at scheduled prices and Quex's Company took the discounts in cash. This ingenious arrangement, incidentally, lessened rather substantially the profits of the individual concerns, and as the managers had an interest in these, Livingstone felt more than doubtful as to the morality of the affair. Quex had no scruples.

"We carry on two types of business," he explained, "and we must keep them distinct. Nothing is more fatal than running one business at a loss in order to get an artificial profit on another. All these big vertical trusts which are growing up will break down on this point directly there's a slump. When the key business

falls off they'll have not one but ten businesses on their hands, all working at a loss, and none of them organized on a competitive basis and able to stand the strain. . . . However, that's all beside the point, because these petty little shopkeepers aren't going to be allowed to get the benefit of my brains on any terms, and you've just got to keep them quiet if any of them have the sense to tumble to the position."

So that was that! At that time Livingstone persuaded himself that Quex was right, and to the end confessed himself doubtful. It wasn't cricket, of course, but it was, he supposed, business. The real thing was that it pleased him, because it gave him a lot to do.

The mentality of the chemists was not high, but their complaints were voluminous and obstinate. The suppliers to whom they were tied were incompetent. Old customers were leaving them every day. Business was falling off because of the Insurance Act. Some even wrote that they were getting less money now than before they had sold a half-share in their business.

Then there were eternal difficulties over the new leases. Factious opposition, Quex called it. No doubt the real reason was that the rival chemists had more drinks with the estate agents than Quex's men, on Quex's basis, could afford. To meet this Livingstone gave Quex's men a bonus on the actual signing of the lease, and at least 100 clerks in 100 estate offices were noticeably more amenable.

Of course, Quex's name was kept out of these transactions till the last possible minute, and it was really amazing to find that hardly a single chemist dreamt

for a moment that the mysterious Quex had any interest at all in any shop except his own.

The pacification of the chemists already in the net was only a small part of Livingstone's business. His main occupation was fixing up the agreements with the new victims, who were numerous. Quex took on, actually, another hundred businesses in sixteen months from March, 1913, to July, 1914, and no one who has not tried to do business through the machinery to hand in a small market town can have any idea of the magnitude of the task.

Livingstone, as secretary to the company, had nothing but the formal arrangements to conclude. Corrian went on his travels again and baited the traps. Then Quex would go down with his inimitable smile and a particularly shabby overcoat which he kept for these occasions and settle the terms more or less. Then Livingstone came in with cut and dried instructions: "Close on such and such terms (or better), subject to such and such safeguards as to security of tenure, renewal of lease, surveyor's reports, valuation of stock, etc."

Livingstone was not, you see, what Quex called a "business-getter." He merely had to do the work. It was extraordinarily difficult work but it was just work, and therefore, in Quex's view, didn't command a salary. He was on the same plane, in Quex's view, as judges, civil servants, sailors, architects, priests, scholars, and other lesser fry who didn't "create business."

"Oh, very good, very good, my dear Dick," Quex would say with a yawn when Livingstone handed him

his weekly returns of swindles duly signed, sealed and delivered. And then Quex would throw the thing on one side with the air of a tired Cæsar once more, and very nobly, exchanging the pen for the sword, and go on to talk about the weather. It was infernally galling, but Livingstone found it at least less galling than the compliments which Quex occasionally gave out, and almost always on the completion of a piece of two-penny-halfpenny routine which the office boy couldn't have done wrong. "Top-hole, my dear fellow," Quex would say on these occasions, "this is really top-hole. . . . Thank you, thank you, thank you . . ." At which point his voice trailed away from sheer exuberance of gratitude.

To all this Livingstone's reply was always the same: "It's perfectly simple, Quex, perfectly simple, if you know how to do it." He had a half-hope, and belief, that this annoyed Quex.

The new shops which Quex took over were a great deal better than the first lot. And he got them quite as cheap, because he was rather freer with ready money payments, the shareholders' money being in the bank simply asking to be utilized. Naturally they had to confine themselves largely to unsuccessful businesses and rather senile proprietors, but that was a small matter provided the situation of the shop was all right. For they were really working up for 1917, when Quex's stores were to blossom out simultaneously up and down the country with a big advertising campaign to boost them.

Working for this, they had an exact idea of the general plan and style to which the branches were to

conform, and part of Livingstone's job was to get each of the former proprietors to agree to do as many of the necessary structural modifications as possible out of income during the period of his agreement with Quex.

Livingstone was much struck, in these early months, by one thing. Corrian and Quex between them professed to have persuaded their victims to do literally everything they wanted. Yet Livingstone had the utmost difficulty in getting their signature to anything at all. When he came to see something of "business methods" in the Ministry of Munitions in 1918 he was up against the same problem. The incurable sloppiness of their contracts, the lack of the most elementary precautions, seemed to recall Quex at every stage. Yet the munitions came to hand.

And certainly the traditional sloppiness of Quex was infinitely better than the haphazard adoption of so-called efficiency systems which is, I hear, the fashion today. Quex was, fundamentally, on the right lines. Not morally, perhaps. He was hardly one of those rare souls in whose eyes you can see the light of truth intimately revealed and whose reward is hereafter in the minds of men and the sight of God. Quex was different. But if a man wants to make money and isn't concerned to produce anything in return he would be well advised to set about it in the Quex way. Such men have their reward in cash.

Quex certainly had his. By 1914, at a very conservative valuation, the liquid assets of the Company were worth the amount of their capital, and in the course of the next three years, they would acquire without further capital outlay assets worth at least another

£15,000. In 1914, moreover, the Company paid its first dividend. Wisely this was only a nominal 5 per cent., but a substantial sum—between £7,000 and £8,000—was put to reserve and the business generally was sound as a bell. So sound that after working fourteen hours a day for fourteen months without a break, Livingstone was given a rise in salary of £250 a year. Quex volunteered this in a fit of generosity. Livingstone had meant to insist on a rise of £500.

Then, suddenly, came ominous rumors. Livingstone had to go and see Quex actually on the morning of the Serajevo murders, and found him for the first time really intolerable.

"What do you think of this?" Quex exploded, holding up a copy of the Daily Mail. "Here's this infernal fellow Northcliffe scaring everyone out of their lives talking about a European War. The fellow doesn't realize that every business in the country will be bankrupt within a week of the declaration of war."

"What are you going to do about it?" Dick asked, rather annoyed. "If anyone in this country can prevent war they will, but if they can't we've got to face it."

"We've got to keep out of it," Quex said, with a really grotesque imitation of the Napoleonic air. "Here am I sweating my guts out"—when Quex got excited he dropped rather easily into the vernacular—"to create business, to stimulate enterprises, to give employment, and these fools come in and muck the whole thing up."

"That's what Canute said about the waves, isn't it?" Dick asked rather maliciously. The idea of

forces rooted deep in the character and history and passions of Europe being side-tracked to keep the field clear for a twopenny-halfpenny company promoter irritated him. Till that moment he had never lost an opportunity of abusing Northcliffe's scare-mongering, but Quex's egotism was the more revolting manifestation. It was so clear that what riled Quex about war was the one thing about it which redeems it, and that is that for ninety-nine people out of a hundred it's a disinterested venture. The idea of a war worked up by armament firms and bankers is feasible, but it never convinced before 1914, and is grotesque now, with the archives of Europe open to view.

The month of July, 1914, was one of the most interesting of Livingstone's career, for he was privileged to watch the reactions of historic forces and passions not on statesmen, soldiers, scholars, poets, *mondaines* or men-about-town but on small shopkeepers, country solicitors, estate agents' clerks and local innkeepers from Land's End almost literally to John o' Groats.

"To hell with Serbia!" was at the start a very fair summary of the national outlook. Not for Quex's reasons, of course, but chiefly because of a deep-seated and perfectly accurate feeling that family life in the Balkans was not all that it should be. But very soon there came a change. The slowly dawning realization that force was being used somewhere, and the ensuing disillusion, is difficult now to recall. Time has dealt hardly with the leading actors of those fateful days, and we can imagine today only something like the stage thunder of their pinchbeck successors. The actual note was different. It was desperate gambling with

men's lives and fortunes, and while the financiers were quaking in their shoes and social adventurers in Mayfair were getting ready for the fun, the man in the street was looking a serious question in the face.

The highbrows laugh today at the idea that we went into the war for any honorable motive. Luckily highbrows write as little history as they make, and when they do write it nobody reads it. Obviously the invasion of Belgium was the occasion and not the cause of our entry into the war—but equally obviously the cause of our entry into the war was to oppose certain historic forces which even in the lurid evening of their catastrophe can hardly be idealized into forces potent for good in the evolution of civilization.

The extraordinary thing was, not that we went into the war but that the fundamental issues, now obscured by a flood of claptrap, were at the time so readily understood. We know, of course, that the Germans came into the war with equal enthusiasm. Therefore, say some searching critics, it was—in the language of Armenian society—fifty-fifty. But for the fact that the issue was finally decided by the verdict of neutral nations, the parallel between the higher direction of the Central Powers and that of the French, English and Americans would be exact and penetrating. As it is, dishonest balderdash is a flattering euphemism.

Yet when Livingstone came back to town at the end of July, hurriedly recalled by Quex, he got a foretaste of this sort of talk which was profoundly enlightening. He found Quex in a state of panic-stricken indignation. Did no one realize that we should all be poorer as the result of the war? What about the sacredness of

human life? What need was there for Englishmen to worry about a lot of foreigners? Didn't the Government realize that we weren't ready for war? What was the use of our absurd little army against a really efficient nation like Germany? Churchill was a German spy! Asquith ought to be impeached.

The thing was sickening, and yet Livingstone felt at the time genuinely sorry for Quex. It wasn't really his fault that an easy and complaisant generation apparently caring for nothing but idle pleasures had allowed him to think that he was a person of importance, had tolerated him in good clubs and even in ladies' drawing-rooms (at charity tea parties) and placed the whole machinery of the State behind his little enterprises. And it was really pitiful to see this usually vigorous man just then in a state of tremulous isolation, engulfed by forces which he didn't even begin to understand, deaf to the call of all those fundamental loyalties which are the birthright of decent men and suddenly discovering that in the face of these imponderable issues nobody, high or low, cared twopence whether he was ruined or not. He just didn't count.

In one sense there was some reason in his bitterness. If he had cultivated society, if he had acquired a fashionable mistress, if he had even gone into Parliament, if he had done any one of half a dozen other things he could have got just on to the fringe of things. But as a company promoter sticking gallantly to his loot he suddenly became a merely ridiculous figure.

But the even more ridiculous part of the business was that Quex had been so completely thrown off his

balance that he failed to realize that, once the war was well started, his kidney would have the time of their lives. He didn't understand that because people are fundamentally eager for self-sacrifice in any decently compelling cause, they aren't any the less ready to pay tribute to financiers. To him the whole world was just topsy-turvy, and he had a horrified vision, I feel sure, of people absolutely refusing to be swindled by him any longer. Could any prophecy have been more ludicrous?

It was not until the crash finally came that Quex recovered to any extent. Of course, Livingstone told him that, contract or no contract—he left that to his solicitors with a sneaking pleasure in the conviction that even Quex could hardly take an action of that sort into court—he was going. Quex's air of mortified resignation was admirable.

"Another damned fool," was what he wanted to say, but he contented himself with a supreme assumption of resignation to the criminal follies of mankind. Alone, if need be, he would bear the intolerable burden of making his fortune.

"Someone has got to keep the old country going," he sighed, as Livingstone said good-by, "and as all you youngsters have lost your heads . . ."

And so, squaring his shoulders to the task, Quex bravely bade his cousin Godspeed. It was a touching moment.

That Livingstone was the rat and Quex the captain remaining dauntless on the bridge was not, of course, for a moment in doubt. But his benediction was, in the language of the present day, "a gesture" which

gave him, incredible though it may seem, a thrill of conscious virtue. Only once, indeed, did Livingstone ever see Quex at such a height of exaltation, and that, curiously enough, was when they met in 1917. Livingstone was on leave from the Salient, and Quex was inveighing against the criminal weakness of Lord Lansdowne, while Dick held a feeble brief for the veteran Whig who after all had merely expressed, with a dash of patrician condescension, the feelings of that sincere, if unimportant, minority who were not making money out of the war. Quex, however, was not the type of whom minorities are made, and the war had by that time placed him definitely among the rich, secure and complacent rulers of the new age.

Quex, indeed, soon reacted to the inspiring battle-cry of "Business as usual," and the two months' depression and anxiety which inaugurated those amazing years of adventure actually put a good deal of money into his pocket before some people had begun to look round for contracts. The number of people who sold their businesses to Quex in the last months of 1914 for rubbish prices was surprising, and a still larger number surrendered their right to a share in future profits for a very modest consideration. Later, Quex took a strong line on the presence in his shops of able-bodied assistants of military age, and replaced them with unqualified girls at very low rates of wages. Finally, and most important, the war brought an inevitable increase in the demand for drugs and medical stores, with a corresponding rise in prices and profits.

But it was not Quex the shopkeeper who made most out of the war, but Quex the wholesaler. His contracts

with Messrs. Squirrel and Leather were ingeniously framed (by Livingstone, incidentally) to give him a sliding scale of discounts increasing with the amount of his annual purchases, and there was a closely drawn penalty clause enforceable in the case of non-delivery of supplies within the scheduled periods. It was by no means just a stroke of luck that he should have found himself with what amounted, virtually, to a stranglehold on the output of one of the largest suppliers in the country. The fact was, as will be remembered, that these same supplies had taken up £10,000 worth of shares in the business, and were thus making a contract, in some measure, with themselves. But Quex never minded dividing the loot, provided he himself got a disproportionate share.

Quex actually rallied from his alarm about August 20th, and on August 21st he began to angle for the first of the big war contracts which made more than half his fortune. Of course it was money for nothing. He just passed on his contract orders to his suppliers and took the difference between their price and his in cash. If his suppliers let him down he just passed on to them the War Office penalty claims (if by any chance they enforced them), and as these were less than the claims he himself could exact he made almost as much money on his periodical failures to fulfil his contract as he did on his very laudable average of success.

Livingstone could never find out exactly how Quex got his first contract. Obviously the actual manufacturers could have supplied the urgent needs of the country more cheaply and possibly more efficiently. Livingstone imagined, however, that Quex, who could

work when necessary on a minute margin of profit, must have profited by the proverbial greed of Army contractors and actually undercut them. Also, of course, it was considered, and indeed was, good policy to get as many contractors into the ring as possible, and so avoid the risk of a complete cessation of supplies.

Finally, there was Quex's personality, which, after his first panic, changed immensely under the excitement of the war. He had always suffered from a kind of provincialism which left him speechless with rage against such things as death, sickness, self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, art and letters, or the belief in the justice of God. But his very first visit to the War Office, so Corrian told Livingstone, altered all that. He felt that he was moving in another orbit, and that here at last were people and organizations to whom he was indispensable or at least useful. In other words he gratified his pride and filled his pocket at the same time.

And Quex's pride grew every day. Livingstone discovered this by comparing the Quex whom he had left in such ridiculous circumstances in 1914 with the inflated and almost hearty Quex with whom he joined up again in January, 1919. Everything he remembered was still there, but in addition to the self-esteem of the tradesman pure and simple was the pride of the public man. He made just as much money out of the Government as out of anybody else, and with the same brutal suavity, but he felt that he was a bigger man for doing it. Always extremely hopeful, he was now certain that he was a vital unit in a society where the many

were dependent on the few for a grudging assent to their unimportant existence.

And so we come to the final, the Napoleonic, phase. Quex the clerk, Quex the manager, Quex the company promoter, Quex the merchant princeling, the one merging insensibly into the other by as natural a process of development as that by which an eldest son succeeds to the peerage, or the one-time subaltern to the command of the regiment, all these pass out of the picture.

To buy cheap, and sell dear, to take commissions, to trade in men's brains and fortunes, is the province of the impresario. Quex's aptitude was uncanny, his successes sweeping and ingenious; but there, if that were all, the matter would end. But Quex was different. As Tom Weston had said long ago, he had no entrails. He had tasted of power, and the most seductive of all vices held him enthralled. With money Quex could go on smiling away the honor and the happiness and the fortunes of simple souls who merely worked and, working, earned his merciless and bottomless contempt. And this superiority to the common lot of man which he had won for himself by indispensable services to British industry was now to be applied to even more remunerative tasks. It was a map of Africa which Quex had on his wall when Livingstone at last, in 1919, came back from the wars.

CHAPTER SIX

BY 1919 Quex's hour had struck.

Even before the war, as we have seen, his snapshot had appeared in an illustrated paper, but by 1919 he had reached the stage of a "portrait study." The invitations, once mysterious and acceptable, were now anticipated and refused. The access once eagerly sought to politicians and peeresses was now almost familiar and quite certainly as of right. Quex had something to offer and there was none so rich as to do him a mischief.

It was not quite openly Quex the financier, Quex the exploiter of dingy retail shops, who was the recipient of confidences and the picker-up of carefully considered trifles. Ostensibly, it was Quex the member of Government committees, the British representative on inter-Allied boards, the friend of wealthier men and the confidant, *ex officio,* of high-placed officials and Cabinet Ministers, the man who had twice dined with Lloyd George and once with Lloyd George's private secretary—this was the lay figure whom Mayfair delighted to honor. In other words, appearances, even in 1919, had not entirely gone by the board. But they were wearing very thin. There have always been adventurers in high places, but they had, in the old days, to have tolerable credentials. Now the masquer-

ade of easy money as civic virtue, of sharp practice as disinterested patriotism, of backstairs intrigue as the natural consorting of the eminent with the elegant, was but the flimsiest pretense. Quex's was an alarmingly typical case.

Quex had not, of course, in hard fact, laid aside for a moment his chemists' combine. On the contrary he had launched it on the public the moment the embargo on capital issues was removed, and had got his quarter of a million 8 per cent. preference shares oversubscribed within twenty-four hours. Moreover, he had come out of the deal himself with a fortune in cash, a life Directorship at a large salary and half the ordinary shares. But it was not Quex the chemist whom he saw in the looking-glass of his luxurious flat in St. James, but Quex the public man. Quex, indeed, was post-war by nature and he deceived himself as easily as he did the public on the score of his public services.

But he hadn't lost his sense of business realities. He would not, of course, have been post-war if he had. That is why Quex had begun to think imperially. He had realized at a very early stage in his new incarnation that, while a clever buyer and an astute company financier can make £100,000 more easily than an architect can earn £3,000 a year, it is only the public men with the power to influence public events who can climb the heights. The biggest money can only be staked on a certainty: that may not be the *raison d'être* of Empire, but it was certainly the driving force behind Quex's imperialism.

Simple old-fashioned Corrian had shrugged his shoulders when Quex first discussed his new ambitions

with him towards the end of the war; he was, in fact, severely skeptical.

"You think you can use these fools," he had grunted malignantly, "but you'll find they'll use you. They want the lion's share of the loot, at least."

But Quex, with his pretender's eye apt to detect pretenses, knew better. These sharp-eyed solicitors, shamefaced barristers and rubicund directors of companies whom he found in the seats of the mighty didn't deceive him for a moment, and naturally the others, the last survivors of better days, the aristocrats, the country gentlemen, and the men with genuine business interests and generations of hard practical experience behind them were just those whom Quex never met. Livingstone asked Lestrade once if he'd ever met Quex (and it was only a day or so after Quex's knighthood had figured in the first post-war honors list) and he just said, "Good God, no!" There was, from the point of view of this traditional adventurer among statesmen, no more reason to know Quex than to ask his butler into the dining-room to have a glass of port. Lestrade was selling his own brains, not profiteering in other people's. He had no need of pretenses and never found it necessary to placate the camera man with the disarming smile of the man relaxing for a moment the effort to look as if he were up to his job. The adventurer among statesmen shone clear enough as a statesman among the adventurers.

But it was not necessary for Quex to bother about a man like Lestrade in 1919. "Of course, my dear Dick," he said to Livingstone, "one has to have a

few good old names to put in the shop window, so to speak, but it's the City men who count with me. They understand me, and I understand them. We want to run the Empire as a business proposition."

"Is Quex also among the Bottomleys?" Livingstone asked, as politely as he knew how.

Quex didn't seem to like that much, but he adopted his usual attitude of patience before a monument.

"Ever heard of Bubuland?" was all he said.

Livingstone had. He had shot his first lion in Bubuland with George Tracey twenty years before, but some instinct told him to say nothing about this.

"Well, yes," he equivocated—the trouble of a man like Quex is that he kills the simple English habit of telling the truth in even the most honest of his associates; one can't devote a lifetime profitably to the exchange of gold for brass. "Yes, of course I've heard of it . . . somewhere in Africa, isn't it?"

"Somewhere in Africa . . . how like a soldier! Really, Dick, you soldiers get my goat. You think you're the only really patriotic people, and you don't know that much"—he jerked a rather flabby thumb in the direction of the ceiling to express the immensity of his scorn—"about the British Empire."

"Oh," said Livingstone rather quietly, "you'll find a few soldiers' graves there, I dare say, if you care to look."

"Graves!" Quex assumed a rather pitying look at this point. "We've all got to die sometime. But that's just like a soldier, again. As long as somebody is killed, he's quite sure everything must be all right."

"That's not a very profound analysis, is it?" Liv-

ingstone put in. His annoyance was really conquered by his curiosity, for he knew Quex, and was pretty certain that all this palaver was leading up to some proposal under which Quex, as the man with the brains, would take all the profit, and he himself, as the self-confessed simpleton with no practical sense, would do nine-tenths of the work.

"Well, well, we business men" (Quex, who had never produced anything in his life, loved to describe himself in this way) "get a certain practical way of looking at things which makes us a bit impatient of people like Lestrade and you." (Here was a bit of Quex's elephantine diplomacy—"Lestrade and you!") "It's what I call a sense of actuality."

Livingstone couldn't help saying that he had known better men that Quex to stand up to a firing party at six in the morning for having a sense of actuality too highly developed.

"I'm surprised that you can sit there and talk calmly of such barbarisms," Quex said with a weary smile; "but to go on with Bubuland. It is, as a matter of fact, on the borders of Somaliland, and it doesn't, actually, belong to us. It belongs to nobody as far as I can see, the idea being that the three great powers have agreed to pretend that it belongs to Abyssinia so as to give any two of them a right to interfere if the third tries to collar the place. The idea of developing the country without a good old-fashioned war first is, as I say, abhorrent to any decent Empire builder. The result is that there is any amount of wealth simply waiting to be taken."

"And you propose to go and take it?" Livingstone asked.

"I mean to see that this country gets it," Quex said, correcting his cousin, and then proceeded to sit back in his chair with the air of one shouldering the burden of Atlas.

Livingstone got up and lighted a cigarette.

"How long is it since you were last in Bubuland?" he asked, after a pause.

"My agent returned last week," Quex answered, unabashed.

"And who may he be?"

"Oh, never mind about that, just for the present," Quex answered enigmatically. "But I'll give you all the papers, in a day or so. There'll be a lot of work to do."

Livingstone saw that he was dismissed, and went back to the even less congenial task of organizing the first great Health and Beauty Campaign.

As soon as Livingstone had gone, Quex rang for his secretary.

Rose Samson, unlike Quex, had changed little with the years. She had grown less passionate and therefore more immoral, but there was no human tragedy here. We can clear Quex at once on that count. What had begun as an adventure and been continued as inquiry had become, even by the time Quex knew her, almost a habit. It was not, to be fair, a matter of insatiable appetite, but simply of an expansive generosity demanding grateful victims. In another walk of life with other antecedents she might well have given herself

up to organizing local charity bazaars or Browning Societies. As it was, it had been just her métier to give "the boys" a good time.

Quex, of course, had hardly been one of the boys. He had been through that phase, neither more nor less innocently than Rose, but he had come to her (or rather she to him) on a different footing. He was the millionaire, she the beggar maid, and the fact that, as usual, both came from the same social class made the alliance easy as well as convenient.

It was impossible to put it higher than that. Quex was not a lovable man, and I doubt if he ever loved anyone in his life. A mistress had certain advantages, and it had become part of his routine to have one, but he had nothing to be intimate about with anyone . . . no small talk and no outpourings of soul to vary the monotony of dinners and suppers. Moreover, as he grew richer he had to be more careful. If he were only a little richer still. The world will forgive to genius and wealth what it will not to talent and £10,000 a year.

So Rose had had to put up with a flat in Baker Street, moderately furnished, and a moderate income supplemented by an occasional check. Her Eldorado had faded after a hectic three months, at the end of which Quex had rather bluntly announced that the honeymoon was over and that they must put their affairs on a more businesslike footing. This means, as far as Quex was concerned, simply a limitation of his liabilities. I don't suppose it ever entered his mind that he was doing just the cruelest thing a man can do to a woman—putting her on the shelf and keeping her

there. For keep her he could and did. The flat was just good enough, the allowance just handsome enough for that.

That particular morning she was feeling quite exceptionally disillusioned. She had been out the evening before with one of the half-dozen friends whom she allowed, as far as the "businesslike footing" of her "arrangements" with Quex permitted, to entertain her, and she had allowed in this instance a too liberal measure of entertainment. And Quex didn't know, and wouldn't care if he did. There was nothing to remember and nothing to forget. She hadn't even the faintest hope of a protest.

Yet such is fate that the morning which saw, as she fancied, her ultimate disillusionment was to see in reality the most disgraceful of her adventures.

"Good morning, Miss Samson," Quex said with his usual knowing smile—in his relations with women Quex seldom soared above a good barmaid manner.

"Good morning, Sir Artemas."

This was the unvarying routine, which had begun as an elaborate joke and ended by becoming cruelly representative of a real relationship. The knowing smile implied no longer a romantic familiarity, but the condescension of the prosperous business man towards a member of the lower orders who had to earn her living and wasn't as particular as she might be how she did it. Quex had an exactly similar smile for his lawyers and an even broader one for his confidential accountant. Quex never ate dirt himself, but he purveyed it with discrimination.

But however nasty the taste of that smile which

Rose Samson had to swallow—no smile, no flat—it was taken away by Quex's next remark.

"Lord Soulle wants a secretary."

Rose looked at Quex with a faint flush on her cheeks. She felt herself almost physically coming back to life, but for the life of her she could not open her lips. She just sat there.

"Lord Soulle, you know," Quex went on, "is an ardent feminist, and he feels that it is rather absurd for him to have a staff of secretaries who are all men; he regards himself, I understand, as the champion of women's rights, and he stands for the absolute intellectual equality of men and women. In view of the next election—"

"And what the devil has all this got to do with me?" Rose asked.

Quex ignored the interruption.

"In view, as I was saying, of the pending election, when the women's vote will be the deciding factor, he wants a woman secretary."

"Can't he provide one himself?" she asked.

"No doubt," said Quex, "but it so happens that I should like to provide him with one. It would be invaluable to all our interests—and yours, my dear, are really quite closely allied to mine—that Soulle should have a secretary who could be relied upon to obtain his confidence."

"Are you insulting me?" Rose was amazed to find herself angry.

"My dear Rose," Quex answered with a fraternal smile, which concealed a very real uneasiness lest Livingstone should be listening at the door (Quex

could never get it into his head that the best people do not listen at doors). "My dear Rose, what do you mean?"

"I choose my own friends . . . that's what I mean, if you want to know."

"This virtuous indignation makes you look so charming that you almost make me jealous," Quex said with a cynical grin: this assumption of maidenly virtue was really too absurd.

"Well, anyway, I'm not for sale, and if you want my flat for someone else, I'll look after myself. I know you don't care for me and I should feel happier almost anywhere else." Rose got up angrily.

"Then why not try Lord Soulle?" Quex asked brutally.

"If you're not careful what you say, I will, but not at your orders. You may be interested to know that I don't sit at Baker Street every night twiddling my thumbs. I've got friends of my own."

It was her chance, and she seized it. Quex hadn't known, because simply he hadn't cared, but now he cared very much indeed. And it came over him that he'd really known all the time, and that he'd been a fool. *Le raison a ses raisons que le cœur ne connaît pas.* Quex did a bit of hard thinking. Then he decided to risk it.

"Well, I'll tell Soulle I can't help him. I'd sooner lose his help than yours. Seven years is a long time in a man's life—and in a woman's too. I couldn't face beginning all over again."

If he hadn't been a company promoter Quex would have been an actor. Quex's tone of resignation, the

look in his eyes as of a man who for a moment had had a glimpse of higher things, the catch in his breath as he confessed that he found himself held against his will by the binding force of sentimental memories—above all, his infernal cleverness in refraining from any pretense that he still loved her—the whole thing was a convincing performance of the highest art. Or was it the real Quex?

Rose was beaten. The scale was heavily weighted, of course; there was the flat, there was the freedom, and the income. Still, she had thrown it all up to recapture for a moment her pride, her individuality, her capacity for illusions. How like life that she should surrender herself within a moment to an illusion seven years old, and six and a half years dead!

"I won't let you down, if you don't ask—too much," was all she said. Those seven years of dead memories welled up into her eyes. Only just one tear, or perhaps two, but still refreshing to the parched wilderness of her sterile heart.

"Tell me, my dear, if I ever do," Quex said gently. "What do you really want me to say?" he went on after a pause.

"I won't let you down, after all this time . . . but if I go, I must be allowed to come back . . . fair play, you see!" Her attempt to be bright was hideous, but it was her idea of courage, and it sustained her.

"My dear Soulle."

She looked up at Quex with a bewildered frown. "Do you want me to take that down?"

It was incredible, but it was true, and Quex, who had no entrails, simply went straight on:

"My dear Lord Soulle,—

"I have had a word with Miss Samson and she will, as I told you she would, be only too proud to take the post you offer her.

"If I may be allowed to say so, I think you are as fortunate as I am unfortunate, but you have always shown me such courtesy in the past that I am only too glad to be able to express my gratitude in a tangible way.

"Miss Samson only insists that she shall be allowed, as soon as you can spare her, to return to me here. I told her that she had only to ask to be released, and that you would let her come back at once.

"But I know that she won't let you down.

"Yours very sincerely.

"So that's that," Quex said with a rather less insinuating smile than usual. "I suppose you wouldn't like to dine with me tonight?"

"Not particularly," Rose answered, now thoroughly self-possessed, "but I won't let you down."

And with that she sailed out of the room and left Quex to ponder over his curious triumph.

And yet it was only a small step forward. Soulle was over head and ears in love with the girl, of course. But would he be adequately grateful?

Lord Soulle was, it need hardly be said, the first Lord Soulle, and as none of his children were legitimate there was every chance that he would be the last. The "Soulle of honor" was his sobriquet in the highest political circles, and the jest was not without its

flavor, bitter or sweet according to taste. Originally a fried fish shop proprietor, he had raised himself to the dignity of a hotel proprietor, by transactions too intimate to detail. As a purveyor of food, he was of course a free trader, and as an army contractor, a patriot. The result was wealth and honor in large measure, and a seat in the Cabinet when Northcliffe began to realize that there was a danger of the war being won without his assistance.

His career is an example, in the inspiring words of Sir Tooting Broadway, "of the Eternal Romance of Commerce." Incidentally it has its bearing on the commercial side of Romance.

Lord Soulle indeed remained to the end of his days "a man's man": his conversation was almost entirely about women. On the platform, in the press, in the council chamber, in the board room, he was always the same, practical, breezy, commonsensical, no damned nonsense about him. His official memoranda, which can still be seen in the registries of the Board of Trade, were masterpieces of monosyllabic directness. On all papers requiring ministerial sanction to departmental action the simple words "Speak" and (a week or two later) "Spoken" tell a vivid story of business methods ruthlessly infused into the slow-moving processes of government. Never was he known to write the words "Yes" or "Agree," or even "Concur" these time-wasting phrases, so dear to the mere civil servant, were anathema to Lord Soulle. The word "No" was reserved for recommendations for increases in salary, or "honors" for permanent officials, but in any other connection his business training taught him

that the word had its dangers. "Never write letters" was a favorite maxim with him, but his practice was even more businesslike than his principles; in effect, he never wrote anything at all.

The value of such a man to the nation in a time of crisis was immense. The press covered him with adulation. His immense contracts had, of course, to continue, but his self-sacrifice in resigning from the boards of his companies in favor of his nephew was well described on all sides in the loyalist press as "a noble action comparable only with the sacrifices exacted daily from his fellow countrymen in France." Furthermore, it was self-evident that the man who, standing shoulder to shoulder, as it were, with Sir John Cowans, had fed our vast armies without a single man going short, was the man who could most assuredly guarantee supplies to the civilian populations. The Ministry of National Supply was a tremendous idea: it meant, as the Prime Minister remarked in a moment of exceptional Vision, that "the business government had its finger on the pulse of the nation, that every detail of the life of every citizen would be regulated in the supreme interest of the nation, and that the hideous inequalities between rich and poor would be finally and definitely abrogated." A few superficial critics pointed out from time to time in the columns of the Nation and other defeatist papers that things seemed to be going on just the same as before, but they never faced the only question which mattered, which was, as Lord Soulle said in one of the most famous of his speeches, "What would things be like today if I had not unhesitatingly answered the call?"

Though Lord Soulle was never so foolish as to commit himself, in the futile fashion of Mr. Asquith and his friends, to any definite principles, his several and colossal administrative achievements bore a certain likeness to each other—the impress of a driving force almost superhuman. In other wars, and at other times in the late war, supplies have always tended to be less than the requirements. Lord Soulle's motto was simply: "Take what the soldiers ask for, multiply by four and go ahead." Another motto of his was: "Never mind the cost." He was not a skinflint, and he had a positive abhorrence of red tape. Even the workmen came at times under the influence of his dynamic benevolence, and the women—"God bless 'em"—had the times of their lives and the wages of able-bodied men.

Lord Soulle became, as we all know, a popular hero. Among the poor his reputation hardly, perhaps, survived the unexpected and premature outbreak of peace in 1918, but among the more substantial classes his stock rose. For out of this war, alone of all the wars in which men have died, came no scandals. Royal commissions and select inquiries were abandoned at his instigation in favor of peerages, baronetcies, and O.B.E.'s, and the taxpayer shouldered the gilded and ennobled burden with a becoming resignation which was a wonderful tribute to an almost superhuman prescience. Who could have guessed it? No one but Lord Soulle.

As the army of unemployed grew, so did the admiration of Lord Soulle at the wonderful spirit which was carrying the nation through. In Russia, in Ger-

many, in Italy, in Spain, in South Africa, in Austria, in Turkey, he saw chaos, and it was bad—bad for business. In England alone the ship of State, as he put it, kept an even keel. And so, till dinner time, did Lord Soulle. Cynics said that he drank before breakfast, but because they were cynics even a lie was safe in their mouths. Bolshevists and agitators said that he had made money out of the war, and he agreed with them. That was the English way, and even the ranks of trades-unionism could scarce forbear to cheer.

Such the public man. The private individual was almost as intriguing. "If C—— had had a head for figures," he used to say to his intimates at Walton Heath, "he could have beaten us all at the game." He did not add, what was necessary to complete the amazingly complacent revelation of the real man, that if he himself hadn't been a craven at heart the British public would have beaten him as, in the end, they beat C——.

For the man had the indispensable quality of arrant cowardice. It even took a physical form, and the panic-stricken rushes of the great patriot to the irreproachable cellars of the Foreign Office during the air raids were so degraded as to strain to the uttermost the almost unjustifiable loyalty of his entourage of civil servants whose abuse was his favorite pastime. But this lack of courage was in other respects more fortunately attuned to the philosophy of the age and the needs of the moment. The advance of civilization had reduced to a negligible quantity the calls on the physical endurance of individuals, and the whole resources of its leaders are devoted to eliminating the few remaining occasions on which a well-pressed pair of trousers and

a well-filled pocket provides an inadequate armory against the slings and arrows of fortune. The general fifty miles behind the lines, remote from the consequences of his mistakes, the prime minister, too absorbed in national questions to attend the House of Commons, the business man who does not concern himself with details, the biographer who seeks the dispassionate note in the resolute avoidance of the personal intimates of his subject, the artist who despises form, and the schoolmaster who believes in teaching nothing except what everyone wants to learn, have lit a number of powerful candles which will take a lot of putting out. Lord Soulle was not the man to fight the flames.

And so the personal contacts which might have done more than irk him were for the most part easily avoided. There had been one or two nasty incidents in his life which he never recalled without sustaining a queer feeling at the pit of his stomach, but his lesson had been learnt early. He was not a man who could live dangerously, and after the age of five and twenty he never tried. He never committed himself to any expression of opinion till he was sure that he would carry the day, and he had his ear so close to the ground that he could always turn his coat before his colleagues had unbuttoned theirs. He had no convictions to hamper his judgment, and no gust of popular feeling ever found him unresponsive. The secret of his success, in short, was that he always did the wrong thing at the right time.

His entry into politics had taken place very late, but his attitude to politics was only his attitude to life. He

was the man who always got away with it. If you knew nothing and cared for nothing, it was so easy. After all there was always a little something left over, and if you didn't care what it was as long as you got it . . .

"If you want to get drunk, get drunk," he used to say to one of his colleagues, "but be sure that you know when it's coming on and make arrangements accordingly."

"I hate to see a man make a beast of himself in public," was another saying of his, and he was quite sincere. He hated publicity as he did the devil.

Except publicity of the right kind. He came to love that, though he liked other people to pay for it. On the occasion of his great meeting for women at the Queen's Hall in 1918 he had told his secretary to ring up Morton, one of the caucus organizers, for a crowd of three hundred enthusiastic women to cheer him outside the hall.

"Three hundred women. . . . Right you are, old man. . . . I'll deliver the goods. . . . What about the money, though?" Morton's staccato shouts came over the telephone like a steam saw.

"How much do you want?" asked Soulle's secretary. "The Chief doesn't want to splash too much; we've got sixteen meetings in three weeks."

"Three-and-six a head is the cheapest I can do. . . . I suppose working women will do?" Morton shouted back.

"Three-and-six, sir." The secretary looked questioningly at his chief and held his hand over the mouth of the telephone.

"Three-and-six is too much," Soulle growled. "Get girls."

Morton was surprised and said so.

"Girls will look damn silly," he shouted back with all the injured pride of the artist, and Soulle was appealed to again.

"Get girls," he repeated, "and get 'em cheap."

That was Lord Soulle at his most dynamic.

The reports of Lord Soulle's Queen's Hall reception justified him. "Nothing," said Mr. Henry Bugbear, "more touching in the annals of our politics has ever been seen than the gathering of young working girls—mere children, some of them, and not a few with babies in their arms—who had paid their pennies and twopences to come from the heart of the poorer districts of London to pay their tribute to the great champion of women's rights. Truly we can say of the party of which Lord Soulle is the most dynamic inspirer, 'a little child shall lead them.' "

Yes, Soulle had a sense of humor. Quex poohpoohed the story when he heard it; there was something "unsound" about that kind of cynical buffoonery which might—who could say?—be reflected in the balance sheet of some of Soulle's companies. It left a taste in his mouth which he didn't like. He liked safety and respectability (in other people), and he felt that, looked at from a really conservative viewpoint, Soulle was neither safe nor respectable. But the fact remained that Soulle, on the reconstruction of the Government, had become Secretary of State for the Colonies, and he had had to find some ground of approach to him. Bubuland was pressing.

His agent's report was a remarkable document. On the technical side it said very little that was new. There was undoubtedly gold, and there was scope for developing a canned-meat industry which must inevitably knock the bottom right out of the Chicago combines if the railway facilities through Somaliland could be developed. But Quex, ready enough to take the black man's gold, was reluctant to assume the white man's burden. International jealousies, native risings, black-water fever and twenty years' pioneer work without a penny for your pains made small appeal to him. What intrigued him was the news that the Regent of Abyssinia would lease vast concessions with every assurance of protection to any syndicate which could guarantee not to prejudice his claim to sovereignty, coupled with the information that the native population could be organized on the quiet so as to insure that the Regents' pledges would be broken on any convenient occasion.

It was the age of small nations. What if, after a time, the natives of Bubuland, supplied by a beneficial trading corporation with every modern convenience, should rightly struggle to be free? Alternatively, what if they should be guilty of a series of brutal assaults on English property and life? Who could then say what might happen? It depended on Lord Soulle.

Lord Soulle at their first talk—not at the Colonial Office, of course—looked and felt extremely nervous. The Soulle of honor was naturally jealous of his reputation, and Quex's hints were as elephantine as his compliments.

"The cardinal principle of our policy in Bubuland

is non-intervention," Soulle had said, again and again, with varying emphasis.

"But no one wants you to intervene," Quex rejoined patiently; "what we want is an assurance from you to the Abyssinian Government that you never will intervene."

"But that would be tantamount to intervention from the French point of view, and the Italians would raise hell. . . ."

"But you'll only be saying once more what you've been saying for years. Surely your people at the office can find a formula. That's what civil servants are for, isn't it?"

"The damned fools would find a hundred formulæ if they were asked to, and then find a hundred loopholes in each as soon as we thought we'd done the trick. It's too dangerous. And where's the money in it?"

"It's a great piece of Empire building . . . that's how I look at it," Quex played his last card. "Frankly, my dear Lord Soulle, I don't want to go down to history as a war profiteer. . . . I want to do something to show that a business man, in cooperation with another business man—a chance like this may never recur—can really make the Empire a first-class investment." Quex rang the bell. "I'm just going to show you some figures I worked out."

It was at this point that Miss Samson had come in, and, being the perfect secretary, if nothing else, had brought with her the very papers in question.

"Dashed pretty girl that of yours, Quex," the champion of women's rights exclaimed just a second before the door was shut. "If I had a girl like that I could

do a bit of Empire building." His bull neck grew scarlet with exhilaration at the idea.

"You're one of her heroes," Quex put in—it was one of his greatest flashes of inspiration, though he hadn't realized it at the time.

"Am I, by God?" Soulle exclaimed. "I think we must have another talk or two about this scheme of yours." His eyes began to glint. "Seriously," he pulled himself together, "I don't like it, Quex. It's dangerous. How about the natives? I suppose Bubuland is the sort of place where there are natives . . . or dagoes, or something of that kind."

That was so like Soulle, Quex felt. It was so crude, so unsound. But he said nothing except to convey by a nod that the population was exclusively black, or at least brown.

"But what do they think about it all?" Soulle repeated his query.

"Loyal to a man," Quex said shortly, as if the mere idea of a disloyal native was rather unpleasant.

"Pathetic contentment and all that?" Soulle asked for confirmation.

"That's the phrase," Quex answered complacently, and locked his agent's reports in his drawer.

"Well, don't let Montague know," Soulle said with a grimace as he rose to go. "Meanwhile, I'll get my people at the office to look into the whole question. What sort of figure have you got in mind for the chairmanship of the show—must have a figurehead for that, of course, and something might turn on that."

"Oh! nothing less than £10,000 a year, I should say," Quex answered easily.

"Well, give my love to your charmer and tell her I'm coming again," Soulle had said as he went out of the door: "I never forget a face."

Lord Soulle had thought hard over that interview. And so had Quex. But whereas Lord Soulle's thoughts were mixed, Quex's were simple. For Lord Soulle wanted three things. He wanted to make his reputation as a great Secretary of State; he wanted to get hold of Quex's ravishing secretary; and he wanted the reversion of that £10,000 per annum when his time of office came to an end. Quex simply wanted the Colonial Office blessing as cheaply as he could get it.

He was far from clear in his head about the whole matter. He had lied to Soulle about the natives because he had an instinct, just as Livingstone had lied to him about his personal knowledge of Bubuland because he had an instinct. Bubuland was that kind of place. The Rand and the nineties all over again. Quex just remembered those days; his mother's fragile fury and his father's resignation to higher taxes and poorer patients. The reality of the war had been, of course, utterly remote from their faded little suburban home, and the only intimate contacts were with one or two impoverished mothers of soldier sons whose quiet pride reflected a disinterestedness which, belonging to a strange and distant world, came back to him now and seemed to lend a certain dignity to the exploitation of natives and the fight for mineral rights.

Of course there must have been people like himself, and even perhaps like Lord Soulle, pulling strings behind that dusty curtain. Fortunes being made and

directorships being bartered, and men dying to seal the bargain that meant nothing at all to them.

Yet, despite himself, Quex found it strange to be hobnobbing with a real Secretary of State about the exploitation of a country which was in actual fact as large as the Transvaal, and it was somehow extremely comforting to think of those pale anxious widows in Balham more than twenty years ago, bearing so patiently the burden which they took, in the innocence of their hearts, to be a matter of course. The Empire had willing servants, and Quex, just as he had suddenly realized seven years ago that he was in society, suddenly realizing now that he was an Empire builder, felt not, of course, grateful—that would be absurd—but comforted. It gave the necessary element of soundness to the affair. Savages were incalculable people, but the simplicity of the English officer class was still a sound, commercial asset to the men at the top.

And following out his train of thought Quex rang the bell for Livingstone.

Livingstone appeared.

"Well, Quex," he asked before Quex had time to get a word in, "what did that old scoundrel Soulle want?"

Quex was annoyed; he had just been thinking of himself as being, at last, one of the men on the top, the men who count, finally and publicly removed from all those little middle-class men who worked for others, or even, in a small way, for themselves. And it was a trifle disgusting to find that Livingstone wasn't exactly impressed by his new associate. And finding it a trifle disgusting he tried to avoid swallowing it.

"Well, you know, my dear fellow, when you get to my position and find yourself meeting these people on terms of equality you find it's a very different story to what we read in the papers."

"You seem, on the contrary, to be finding Lord Soulle exactly as the papers describe him."

"Oh, well, of course, between you and me, old Soulle isn't exactly what we should call a gentleman . . . leads the missus a bit of a dance and all that . . . but when you get down to it, he's a man."

"In plain English the fellow is a scoundrel," Livingstone said, grimly, "but I dare say there are many worse nowadays. What did the fellow want? It's a new thing surely for Secretaries of State to come wandering into City offices . . . it's the sort of thing which would make Gladstone turn in his grave."

"If you want to know, my dear Dick, he came because I asked him. . . . You forget that we poor individuals who have to keep the country going are just beginning, I won't put it higher than that, to get some small say in the general running of things. After all, the thing has got too big to be looked after by a little set of middle-class soldiers and civilians with a few amateur political nincompoops as figureheads. The business man must be allowed some sort of a show."

Livingstone was silent. He was really too dumbfounded at the idea of Quex being allowed even the smallest share in running things. True, Livingstone had said of Quex years ago that he was the type that did run things. His exact words had been that if he'd been a little lower in the social scale he'd have run a brothel, and if he'd been a great deal higher up he'd

have run the country. But the horrible thing for Livingstone was that his saving clause had gone by the board. Apparently no one cared nowadays who did run the country. And, of course, a generation which would swallow Soulle wouldn't strain at Quex.

"It was, of course, your Bubuland scheme," Livingstone said after a pause. "Did the fish take the bait?"

"Queer fellow, this cousin of mine," Quex reflected before answering; "if he can fit anything into a metaphor from some primitive and cruel kind of sport he thinks he's satisfied his conscience."

"Yes," he went on out loud, "it was about Bubuland. . . . The fellow is interested, but there are, of course, diplomatic difficulties. What I want is someone who can govern the damned place while we're getting the plant down and the railway linked up. One of those strong, silent men I've read about, who don't take bribes and administer rough and ready justice with a riding whip to natives. Not too clever, you know . . . we don't want a chap like that messing about, sending back reports about mining prospects or the risks of trouble with the natives—not that there is any risk of that," he added hastily, "or any other damn fool thing which might play old Harry with the market in the shares."

"Someone who can keep his eyes shut," Livingstone sneered.

"My dear Dick, you always look at things from the wrong point of view," Quex exclaimed, with his face all puckered up with an immense assumption of contempt. "I just want an honest man, and not a man who's going to speculate on inside information."

Livingstone was not much impressed, but after all, if the Colonial Office let the thing go through, it was presumably all right: so he just said, with an air of rather passive acquiescence, "George Tracey's the man you want."

"George Tracey," Quex repeated the name slowly, as if there was something about it which left rather a nasty taste. "Not a name to conjure with, is it?"

"I shouldn't advise you to," Livingstone answered, rather tartly.

"Oh, he's that kind, is he? Well, it's worth while looking him over, I suppose. Better send him along."

"I think I'd better get him to ask you down to his place for a week-end," Livingstone suggested. "I don't suppose he'd mind, as a matter of business."

Quex was used to being stung, once or twice a week, by his cousin, but he'd noticed that Livingstone never showed fight about his own interests, so he'd decided long ago to put up with it. Quex's view was that it was good business to suffer fools quite gladly when they were cheap.

"Just as you like, my dear Dick," Quex yawned. He felt that there was always a lot to be said for being in the other fellow's ground. A host can hardly ask much from his guest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GEORGE TRACEY was true to type. When Livingstone had gone down to his place for the week-end following on his talk with Quex he had found him extremely bored. Tracey was hovering nervously on the threshold of middle age with an unexhausted vitality, a perfect physique, and nothing in the world to do. Nothing in the world is perhaps the wrong way of putting it; nothing in the post-war world would be more exact. Not that he saw it like that. The collapse of three Empires had left him comparatively cold; it was the death of his last surviving aunt which had marked for him the end of an epoch.

He had, of course, been frightened to death of the old lady, and she had left him the place on her deathbed to mark her appreciation of a right and proper state of affairs. But the home which had been for generations a landmark had become somehow, in his hands, just a relic. And the job of custodian of a reliquary did not appeal to George Tracey.

Of course there was some good fishing and a tolerable amount of shooting, and it was impossible to say that there was anything particularly post-war about either the trout or the partridge. But the other neighbors! They had been creeping round in his aunt's time, but she had been an old lady for thirty years

before she died and had never bothered about any of them except the brewers. These aristocrats among the *nouveaux riches* had begun to intrude before she could claim the decent privileges of old age, and their arrival had "caused a lot of talk." And as far as Tracey's aunt was concerned their intrusion went on provoking explosive references to trade till the day of her death. But for the rest, and they were the majority, a generation had grown up which knew not David, and instead of "causing a lot of talk" most of the neighbors had been, for the last twenty years or so, occupied in talking themselves. The boot was on the other leg, in short, long before his aunt died, and poor George Tracey was finding it out, for he was the younger generation, in the common estimation, and was expected to behave as such. The painful gap between the moral and intellectual standards of the Old Priory and those of the neighboring places had got to be closed.

Of course, everyone had been very nice about it. Though the eccentricities of dear old Lady Pontefract had been talked about, no ill-will had been borne. George had been reassured on that point quite early. It was simply that people expected now that things would be a little different. The expectation showed itself only too plainly in a positive deluge of callers and invitations. The curious result was that, whereas in his aunt's time the Old Priory had always been full of visitors, it was now completely deserted. Tracey had no friends of his own to fill the place with, and if he had had, he couldn't have asked them without asking the whole countryside to meet them. So he had solved his problem by letting the shooting and the

fishing and shutting up two-thirds of the house. The old order might pass, but the new was to wait a bit longer before taking its place. The result was that Tracey was bored to death and cursed himself every morning when he got up for his folly in sending in his papers when he came into the place. But for that piece of idiocy he might have been commanding a brigade in India, where there was at least a glimpse or two of the old life and a number of people of the right sort with no more money than a gentleman ought to have.

Livingstone had known Tracey since they were boys together at the Shop, and they had spent more than one spell of leave together looking for such excitement as lions and elephants provide in an imperfect world. But Livingstone had never shared, though he could understand, Tracey's well-posed belief in the superior attraction of the animal creation. The life of men and cities interested Livingstone as a perpetually fresh and vital criticism of the follies and limitations of mankind. It bored Tracey, though fundamentally for the same reason. He hated the overwhelming mass of evidence which mankind in the mass never failed to provide of their own inferiority, and he liked to get away to desert places where he could recapture his belief in the superiority at any rate of the English gentleman to the wiles of lions, the primitive ferocity of elephants and the remorseless challenge of unchanging nature. He used to come back from his adventures feeling cleaner, more confident, more resolute in his avoidance of the contamination of second-rate people with second-rate ideas.

Intellect, pure and defiled, was not Tracey's strong

suit. A fine leader, with a natural eye for country, he was a regimental officer pure and simple, and naturally found his way on to the staff early in the Great War. Livingstone, apt from his studies of men and books in the rarer, if less admirable, qualities of the administrator, began the war as a company commander and ended it as a highly temporary brigadier. His reports were superb, but he was gifted with a power of lucid explanation which confounded his critics only after they had uttered their criticism. I don't suppose that there was any profound disturbance in the Adjutant-General's branch when these two very able officers sent in their papers after the war. Tracey's superficial intractability, Livingstone's superficial pliability had naturally produced in the minds of their official superiors an exactly identical impression of conscientious mediocrity. Tracey was "old-fashioned," Livingstone "lacking in individuality." The golden mean at his desk at the War Office was happy in his consciousness that other and better men remained. Yet the two who went were on the whole so vastly and obviously superior to the many who did not that Tracey at any rate was disinclined to talk any more about the old Army days.

Yet George Tracey had made up his mind and nothing would, as a matter of fact, have induced him to alter it. His aunt had left him the family place, and he felt that an old landmark must not simply be swept away. He had sat at her table, at house parties full of very old and very cantankerous relations, so often, and listened to stories of other days told in a language now almost extinct that he had felt that here was a tradition of aristocratic isolation which could

not be allowed to die. That for everyone except himself it had died twenty years ago, hadn't occurred to him. And so the Last of the Barons had gone back to find himself welcomed by a crowd of cheery stockbrokers and a minority of titled brewers as the Prodigal Son.

Only then had he found out his mistake. His friend, Livingstone, would, of course, have been incapable of that sort of mistake. But he had accepted Quex's offer with just as vast a misconception, and had experienced, because he had asked for less and offered more, an equal degree of isolation. Only his isolation was moral, not social, and was thus all the more demoralizing. Yet it was not without some serious qualms of conscience that he had gone down to draw George Tracey after him into Quex's voluminous net.

Tracey had, of course, been glad to see him, though he professed a mild surprise that he hadn't come down to the country in midsummer in a short black coat, a top hat, and patent leather boots. There had been scores of retired Army officers of a certain type in the City for years, but Tracey had always regarded them as so many fish out of water, and had been rather sorry for them. Most of them had lost all their money very quickly, which was an additional reason for sympathy. But that fellows like Livingstone should go into business with their eyes open was something rather more *outré*—much as if one of his friends came round selling the "Encyclopædia Britannica" on commission—and Tracey always fancied that the situation called for tact in the second degree, which means of course an immediate and hearty reference to commerce as the only

profession for a gentleman. The time had gone by—even Tracey realized that—when the thing could be slurred over by just not mentioning it.

"Do you ever see anything of our crowd?" Tracey had asked Livingstone, after dinner.

"Good Lord, yes! See 'em every day at the Club. It's the fashion now to earn an honest living, George. You ought to take it up. Do you good."

"Not for me, Dick," Tracey had said, rather too quickly for conviction. "I'm settled down here. Give me a horse, a dog and a gun and you can keep the doubloons."

"You seem to be under the impression that you've only got to sit at a desk in Maiden Lane and the money comes rolling in. . . ."

"Doesn't it?" Tracey asked. "There isn't any shortage of it as far as my neighbors are concerned, and judging by their faces it didn't need many brains to get hold of it."

"Brains—good Lord, no!" Livingstone lighted a cigarette. "The extraordinary thing is that the touch which makes the difference between success and comparative failure in business is something utterly divorced from intellect, even from intelligence. And just as much divorced from honesty or dishonesty. I don't say that I can think of any of our kind who've got it, but I fancy that that's just accidental."

"What *is* the touch?" Tracey asked, rather bored. "Sleight of hand?"

"Simply acquisitiveness, I fancy," Livingstone answered; "but of course that's just begging the ques-

tion. Why do they acquire money? I give it up. What's the shooting like down here?"

But Tracey was obstinate and wouldn't let the subject drop. "I'll tell you," he said finally, "what the plain truth is. The business man makes his money because that's all he sets out to do. We've been brought up differently . . . and I'm going to stick to it."

"Oh! for that matter, so am I," Livingstone said airily enough. "I believe you're right all the same . . . it fits in with Quex's great saying, incidentally, that any fool can pay a 5 per cent. dividend."

And so they had talked round and round their subject as soldiers so often do.

Finally, when Tracey was explaining how intolerable his neighbors were, and how, to avoid knowing them, he had let the shooting and fishing and pleaded poverty, Livingstone had put it to the test.

"Like a couple of years in Bubuland, George?" He shot out the question as they were going over some more land—it was just a week before the 12th.

"Bubuland . . . God's own country, if ever there was one," Tracey answered. "Don't you agree? Didn't we go there together once, long years ago?"

"So we did," Livingstone played up, as if the unrelenting years had preserved only the faintest of memories and it might just as well have been Dieppe that they had visited together. "Anyway, I want you to go back there, George."

"You want me to, or you think I shall make your fortune if I do?"

"My dear George, I'm not a business man," Livingstone had replied readily enough, though his conscience was not altogether clear.

"When I say you, I mean Quex," Tracey had answered, with a smile which may or may not have been good-humored.

"Oh, Quex isn't Empire building for the fun of the thing, any more than Rhodes was, or any of that white-livered crowd whom we used to see at the Mount Nelson at Capetown in bad old days, but money making is not your part of the job."

And Livingstone had explained the position as it had been explained to him. More or less. He did not tell Tracey that that disinterested statesman, Lord Soulle, was taking a personal interest in the game. He had an idea that Tracey might not care for a share, however unremunerative, in an undertaking tarred with that particular brush. Moreover, Quex had given him the most precise instructions to keep the Soulle of honor well in the background. "He isn't one of those self-advertising politicians," had been Quex's exact words and Livingstone had taken due note.

The extraordinary thing was that long before the end, Livingstone had interested Tracey. The chance of useful work untainted by commercialism was a strong bait. It was true that he would be working in the interests of a syndicate whose sole object was to make money. Livingstone had no illusions of his own on this score, and didn't conceal the fact. But Tracey's job was to negotiate the concessions (a mere matter of form) and then to be responsible for the administration of the territory taken over while railways were

being laid down, factories and trading stations built, cattle ranches established, and so on. It was, in effect, just the work which men of Tracey's breed had been doing for a few nominal hundreds a year for generations.

The organization of a police force, the dealing out of rough and ready justice, the custody of millions of pounds' worth of stores, the organization of labor gangs, the uprooting of corruption and the safeguarding of such modified forms of personal liberty as the mixture of a lot of scoundrelly whites with an equally scoundrelly lot of natives made possible or decent. . . . All this undoubtedly held out to Tracey the prospect of filling up usefully and honorably the intervals between big-game shooting, riding and sleeping.

And the great point about Tracey, from the Syndicate's point of view, was that he would know exactly what he wanted for the job. Livingstone knew that if only Tracey could be brought up to the point of making a decision, he would have a working system of administration, a first-rate police and postal service, good sanitation in the camps and a very tolerable medical organization within six months of his arrival. Moreover, the toe of his boot would be waiting for any corrupt contractor or bullying foreman, loose-living engineer, or gin-purveying canteen manager, who might threaten trouble, and they would know it and keep the show running within the decent limits of a respectable piece of Empire development.

But if Tracey was interested, he was a long way from committing himself.

"What I hate are all the inevitable scandals—pilfer-

ing natives, contractors taking bribes, trouble with the native women, and the inevitable murder or two by outraged husbands, doctors who drink, packing-cases full of coal dust, cases of whisky full of vinegar, cattle plagues of every kind due to infernal carelessness or the pure damned ignorance of somebody's aunt's nephew. Money thrown away, life thrown away, health thrown away. . . ."

"You're in a cheerful mood, George," Livingstone put in.

"Cheerful! Why should I be? And then there'll be your friend Quex shoving his oar in and telling me how to run the country with votes for women and trial by soviets of Bubus. Why doesn't he run it himself and watch his ten millions of stores fading away like snow on the Equator? I suppose he thinks it an economy to have one honest man mixed up with the affair."

That was so like George. He saw the point at once, and having seen it, just turned his back because human nature was, after all, not quite up to his own damnably altruistic standard. He was cold, proud and rigid. Born, perhaps, to inherit the earth; but for the conquest only of its desert places. For the conquest of men is not like the conquest of nature, a thing to be achieved by endurance and the pitiless sacrifice of self, an affair of the wisdom that comes from God and returns to Him the heroic exaltation of disinterested and passionate exertion. No! The conquest of men is an affair of knowledge, of art almost, to be achieved by flattery, by cunning, and by a rigid and undeviating insistence on the most futile of all claims, the claim

of a man to be better than his fellows. George Tracey knew well enough that he was better, but he was not the man to argue with his inferiors, still less to flatter them. Unless . . .

For as Livingstone saw long before the decanter of port was finished, there was a saving clause. Perhaps it was money. But of course it could not be money! That was his own blind spot, for which he would sacrifice just a fraction of his too refined sensibility, retaining the greater part of it intact to ornament his egotism with the necessary complement of "redeeming features." Tracey was different—and better. He was of the type that would break up an estate to pay a debt to a card sharper, or a bet to a man who had caught him on a certainty.

Suddenly it came to him. It was money, perhaps, but money etherealized in the shape of Eve. Perhaps the old fashion of his ancestors had been too strong for him, and there was growing up in him the need to see the anachronism of his name and tradition live at least into another generation of spendthrift tradesmen and cocktail-drinking stockbrokers. What woman was destined for the task? That it would be more of a labor than a pleasure was so obvious.

Livingstone had left on Monday without the answer to his riddle. The fact that the riddle was there was made clear, however, by Tracey's grudging agreement to meet Quex. "The fellow must come down here," he had insisted, "else I might be rude to him." But he had made no other condition.

It was not Lord Soulle's way to ride roughshod over

his officials, a task which involves not only reading but understanding those painful memorials of the identity of error in successive generations which civil servants call "the papers." But his officials made it clear to him quite early in the proceedings that they knew all about Bubuland, and that the less said about it the better. There was no doubt whatever that concessions were obtainable: it appeared—and here Lord Soulle saw reason to revise his rather empirical knowledge of his more aristocratic predecessors—that no fewer than six out of ten Secretaries of State had called for detailed reports on this point. But it was not a matter in which the Government could make representations. "Assurances have been given in the contrary sense," Lord Soulle was told more than once, and the phrase was clearly meant to bring the discussion of a rather unsavory topic to a conclusion.

The Soulle of honor sat back in his chair. "What are you going to do about it?" he asked suddenly. It was a favorite gambit of his, and had worked wonders at the Ministry of Supply. But the officials of the Colonial Office were made of sterner stuff, and Sir Everard Smith simply answered, "I don't think we ought to do anything," and picked up "the papers" from the Minister's desk with a distinct invitation to finality.

Unfortunately, the reports from the country, which the Chief Whip had shown to Soulle, indicated the approach of an even more definite kind of finality to his official labors. It appeared, indeed, that the country was just a trifle unappreciative of the merits of himself and his colleagues. There were even rumors

that the more recent creations in the peerage were not, without exception, men of honor, and that their newly acquired dignity had been purchased by services of a kind even less distinguished than the old-fashioned contribution to the party funds. Indeed, while the bourgeoisie, and not a few trade unionists, were ready to admit that politicians must live, it was getting painfully clear that the people as a whole were less unanimous about it. The unpleasant inquiries before the Public Accounts Committee about the expenditure of £40 on champagne and cigars for Lord Soulle and his party between London and Paris was, it seemed, by no means forgotten, despite the fact that the private secretary who was not responsible, and who had even gone to the length of repaying the amount in question out of his own pocket, had been severely censured.

Another ominous factor was the state of the press. Only one newspaper proprietor remained who had not been raised to the peerage. The result, to put it quite bluntly—and Soulle was a man who, with all his faults, faced facts—was that there was only one newspaper proprietor who was whole-hearted in his support of the greatest government of modern times.

Worse still, there was the deplorable misunderstanding in regard to Turkey. The idea of a Chartered Company, under Greek direction, to take over the administration of Turkey in the interests of the oppressed Christians, had been attractive, and the figure mentioned to Lord Soulle had been only less pleasing than that mentioned to the Prime Minister's indefatigable private secretary. Lestrade, with his old-fashioned conceptions of national honor, had led the Cabinet up

to the point where compromise seemed impossible, and everything had looked rosy when the bottom suddenly tumbled out of the whole business. The soldiers actually made peace over the heads of the poor unfortunate civilians. And the public gave Lord Soulle and the Prime Minister no credit for the happy termination of the adventure, while no one seemed to mind Lestrade's share which had been so obviously a major one. There was here the threat not only of political but of personal disaster.

The long and the short of it was that Bubuland now loomed too large on Soulle's horizon for him to let Sir Everard Smith take the papers away quite in that peremptory fashion.

"May I suggest," he said, after a pause, "that we give our Minister instructions, in due course, to say that in view of the activities of certain trading companies in Bubuland, H.M. Government think it right to reaffirm their belief in the necessity for maintaining the territorial integrity of the Bubuan Empire."

Sir Everard stood for some moments on his toes on the hearthrug, gazing at the ceiling.

"I think we should add a saving clause; I would suggest 'the necessity in present circumstances' or 'the necessity so long as the present era of good government and tranquillity persists,' or perhaps 'the necessity for maintaining the territorial integrity of the Bubuan Empire so long as the situation in North Africa remains unchanged.'"

"Let me see that in draft," Lord Soulle said, profoundly relieved. "It may in all human probability be unnecessary to do anything, but you had better send it

in to me duly authenticated for dispatch, so that if anything happens while you are on leave I shall know what to do."

"I'm not going on leave for another three months," Sir Everard said, rather pained at so indelicate an event being referred to; "and, in any case the Foreign Office will have to be consulted."

"But it is just in three months' time that I anticipate a protest from the Emperor," Lord Soulle answered with a statesmanlike air, and made a note on his shirt-cuff that the protest must be timed accordingly.

It was not without significance that from the very start Quex alone was heart and soul in the Bubuland venture. The Soulle of honor was not certain whether it was altogether safe. He was shrewd enough to see —and the unfortunate affair with Turkey was warning enough in any case—that even the most colonial of wars was likely to prove unpopular; and he was also shrewd enough to suspect that the Bubuland natives were not quite as docile as Quex represented them to be. Moreover, a few discreet questions and a glance or two at old files had confirmed this suspicion. But the thing was too good to miss. As a business man he distrusted "good things," but as a sportsman he couldn't resist them.

George Tracey's scruples were of a different kind. Government service was legitimate enough, and for this his responsibilities as a landlord and a country gentleman could go hang. But Quex was a different thing. He tried hard to see Quex as an Elizabethan merchant-adventurer, or even as an Indian nabob of

the eighteenth century but, to his credit, he failed. Yet there was a reason why he should not refuse.

"If you'd only get something to do, George," Hilda had said so often, "I'd think about it."

Not much to go on, certainly, but she would be certain to hear about this, and, if he refused, his slender chance was gone.

For Livingstone had been right. Tracey wasn't in love; no one even supposed that, except, of course, Tracey. But he was violently attracted by the only girl he had met in the last ten years who didn't care two pins for him, and he was going out after her with the same fatalistic courage and the same directness that had marked his pursuit of smaller game in the jungle and in the bush.

Livingstone himself was the most uneasy of all about the affair. To him, in his too easy chair, would come neither gain nor glory, and the fact that there would be no need for any roving flight on his part was no consolation. He saw himself as the soulless administrator, playing with fire and making twopence-halfpenny out of it, if he was lucky. More honest than Soulle, less romantic than Tracey, he carried his burden of disillusion beneath a mask of cynicism which made him excellent company at a dinner table but a thing of less account when big issues were being determined by bigger men. It was, as a matter of hard fact, his time of testing. He knew little or nothing about the business except that it was not straight. And he didn't really know that except by the light of nature and the infinite grace of God. If God had been less gracious,

Dick Livingstone would have been a happier man in these anxious days.

For the affair was coming to a head. Quex had sounded "a few of my friends" and the result, inevitably, had been satisfactory. In the far-off days of the sale of Boscombe Brothers it had been a matter of intrigue, of women and wine and secret commissions, to scrape the necessary money together. Now it needed only a three-halfpenny stamp on half a dozen letters and Quex has £50,000 to play with. He was the Man in whom the people believed; the path to Calvary was not for Quex.

Moved indeed by the simple faith—which was more marked perhaps than the Norman blood—of his associates, Quex had completed the draft of his scheme. The discovery of the source of the Blue Nile was the object of the expedition which Quex, patron of the sciences and seeker after truth in the desert places of the earth, was going to organize. Arriving, in the course of their voyaging, in the little known hinterland of Bubuland, the experts who would accompany the expedition would be impressed—who could fail to be?—by the abundant mineral resources and the matchless climate of that luxuriant country. Seeking, like the merchant adventurers of old, an interview with the titular ruler of this painfully undeveloped country, they would acquire the concessions marked on the map which reposed already in Quex's safe. The element of speculation so fatal to the commercial side of so many pioneering expeditions was, it will be observed, to a great extent eliminated. Even the samples—duly at-

tested—from the lodes of the Bubuland gold-fields were already in the office as a safeguard against contingent misfortune and the arrows of a fortune which in the twentieth century has happily ceased to be at all seriously outrageous for the rich who inherit the earth without the handicap of blessedness imposed by an earlier dispensation.

Livingstone admitted that the idea was brilliant. He had protested pretty hotly at first, but Quex had been able to correct his too sensitive imagination and to show him that the exploration business was not in any sense a trap for Tracey, but a simple and highly original publicity device, which would lend a first-rate news interest to the departure of the expedition.

Moreover, the experts who would accompany the expedition would, Quex had given the assurance readily enough, be genuine experts. Even the doctor would be a properly qualified man not yet removed from the register.

"And when I say 'properly qualified experts,' my dear Dick, I mean it. They'll want their money, of course, but I'm not a twopenny-halfpenny company promoter, and when I want brains I pay for them. We've got to get the public really behind us, and if they want certificates and degrees, professional qualifications"—Quex rolled out the words with the air of an honest man, forced by a perverse generation to dabble in unclean things with a nasty middle-class flavor about them—"the public have got to have them. After all, we want the public's money, and we've got to play fair with them."

Quex sat back with a sigh of noble resignation, and

Livingstone found himself cast for his usual part of the reluctant accomplice in honesty won over by the Napoleon of Little Bethel. Of course, he made his usual protest.

"You talk as if I suggested dressing up Arthur Jones" (Jones was their accountant) "as a mining engineer and sending Corrian out as expert on the breeding of cattle. I only wanted to be sure that you really realized how necessary it is, in a show like this, to put all your cards on the table and keep them there."

"Of course, of course," Quex answered, irritable but undefeated, "I didn't suppose you were serious. I'm not dealing here with a set of sleepy retailers, and I want, in any case, to be absolutely fair to Tracey. If I sent him at once to get the concessions taped out, he'd have a fit of conscience at the last minute and refuse to sign the report."

"What report?" Livingstone asked.

"The report setting out the concessions taken over and their value, of course. It is there already, if you want to know. I wrote it last night."

"I should damned well think he would refuse to sign it," Livingstone answered, "but how the hell are you going to be certain that your experts will vouch for it?"

"Because the experts who will go with Tracey will be the people who've already, in strict confidence, reported to me."

"You'll tell Tracey this, of course," Livingstone said.

"Why not?" Quex answered. "What could look better than to insist that they should go out again, as

part of an expedition led by an absolutely independent, honest-to-God fool with no ideas whatever about finance or business, and be forced to check and verify their conclusions on the spot? You're too cynical, Livingstone. You don't see the full value of an absolutely honest man like Tracey."

"If so, why don't you lead the expedition yourself?" Livingstone asked, but Quex was not the man to fall into the trap.

"My dear Dick," he said with a broad smile, "would the public invest money in my concerns if they thought I was honest? To them I'm the unscrupulous company-promoting slave driver who can be trusted to get a 15 per cent. dividend somehow. You mustn't ask me to sacrifice *my* reputation, any more than Tracey is going to sacrifice *his*."

Yes, Quex was at the top of his form just then. Candid, disarming, cheerful to the point of having three drinks before lunch every day for a week, he was in the mood to carry everything before him. He was going to make the biggest coup of his career, or to lose £5,000, which didn't worry him in the least.

"Heads I win, tails you lose!" That was Quex's secret, and even that was hardly Quex's own. For it is the essential secret of every successful impresario, and we live in an age which is likely soon to be dominated by them, which perhaps is why the pitiful tale of unproductive work is unabated and serves, even in the twentieth century, to keep the majority of suffering mankind in the path of virtue and within reach of the mercy of God.

But Quex had no need of God's mercy, and went

down with Livingstone for his week-end with Tracey with every confidence. And wisdom is justified even of her natural children. George Tracey agreed. But between his first meeting with Quex and his final signature to the agreement was a landmark in the lives of both men. Hilda Altamont was staying at Tracey Hall.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HILDA ALTAMONT was twenty-two. Her father and mother were dead and she had been interred for three years at Girton, where she had acquired an enthusiasm for James Joyce and a detestation of the pseudo-romance of Conrad, the shallow cynicism of Thackeray and the maudlin sentimentality of Dickens. Poetry to her meant T. S. Eliot, and education the diligent borrowing of the New Criterion. She was a Bolshevik, a communist, an Irish republican, a pro-Turk, an internationalist, and an atheist. In short, a typical bourgeois. She enjoyed a comfortable income and the hospitality of a wealthy stockbroking uncle; danced divinely and smoked twenty cigarettes a day. Obviously, her fate was to marry a popular novelist and settle down in Essex.

Her uncle, Charles Altamont, was the nearest approach to a gentleman that was possible, and he happened also to be Tracey's broker: a man of infinite judgment, knowing nothing of men and cities, but all that was to be known about City men. His handicap was plus two, and he hunted twice a week. It was some old-fashioned protective instinct which made Tracey ask him to come over for the week-end when Quex and Livingstone were expected. An instinct

equally old-fashioned, but not in the least protective, suggested the inclusion of Hilda in the invitation.

He had met her only two dozen times or so since he had come to live at his place, and on every occasion she had been rude to him. She thought shooting beastly, she thought landowners were thieves, she thought business men were worse than slave-owners "because they are less honest about it," she thought Kipling vulgar "because he simply doesn't understand that only inferior civilizations try and impose themselves on other people"; she thought the local church ought to be closed "because surely everyone knows that religion is hopelessly unscientific." She "thought," you will observe, quite a lot, and poor George Tracey, who lived for shooting, read the lessons in church on Sunday, collected his rents regularly, and read Kipling's "Jungle Book" on winter evenings with an ever-recurrent surprise at the inexplicable coincidence of the writer's imagination with the reader's experiences, began to think a lot too.

"You're too clever for me," was what he began by saying, and ended, paradoxically enough, by thinking. He was desperately puzzled about it all, but couldn't bring himself to rely on those finely tempered instincts of his which had saved his life in the desert a hundred times, and could have saved his face in a drawing-room if he'd only guessed it. Now he was going to pit her against Livingstone, and guessed that there would be "a very pretty dog fight." He told Dick as much within ten minutes of his arrival.

The meeting between Quex and Tracey was conventionalized into a Collier academy picture by Tracey's

old-fashioned pomposity and Quex's infernal adaptability to atmosphere. Livingstone was secretly disappointed.

"I'm very glad you were able to come," was all that Tracey had said as he shook hands with Quex rather unnecessarily warmly as he stepped out on to the drive. And Quex had said nothing.

Hilda Altamont, her uncle and a mysterious sister-in-law of Tracey's were in the hall, lingering over tea, and after the usual pretense that cold tea was really hot, and the usual talk about trains and roads and the other motorists on the roads (the *nouveaux riches,* as the French have it), "who don't realize that country lanes don't belong to them," the inevitable walk round the garden provided the cement for the week-end house party. Tracey took Quex on the grand tour and Livingstone was left to tackle Hilda Altamont.

They let Quex get ahead, and hung about till they could only just see the athletic figure of Tracey, in a shooting jacket, a pair of old riding breeches and leggings, disappearing into the sunset with Quex plodding along beside him, his hands in the pockets of an enormous overcoat and a bowler hat at a consciously rural angle on the back of his head.

"The old world and the new," Livingstone murmured with just a glance at the girl beside him, "or would you say yesterday and the day before?"

Hilda Altamont looked up with a mild shock of surprise. Here was something unexpected.

"I'm afraid I'm only interested in individuals," she answered.

"How delightfully Early Victorian!" Livingstone parried, and saw that he had scored the first hit. Like all advanced young women, she liked being hit, and all the vitality which is the birthright of the democracy came back to her face. Vitalized, she was handsome, and survived the handicap of her red hair with only a trace of sallowness. Of medium height, dressed in country clothes of the year before last, with a skirt still clinging in the old-fashioned style about her knees, her appearance was dominated by a pair of gray eyes which looked at you with a consciously impudent challenge. "I am desirable and you can't touch me" was the message which Livingstone read with a sense of perverse relief. For she *was* desirable, and she wasn't a fool, a very intriguing combination. But there were no offers, and the blush which spread from her neck to her cheeks was just her reaction to an unusual intellectual stimulus which made her instinctively more provocative and caused her for a moment to imagine a triumph which she meant to reserve at least for another occasion.

"Not at all," Hilda answered quickly. "You don't understand. I mean that I am only interested in people who can express their own individuality, not in people who live according to a pattern."

"How very up to date!" Livingstone commented dryly. "The worst of things which are up to date today is of course that they are out of date tomorrow."

"Are you being sarcastic?" Hilda asked.

"Merely accurate," Livingstone answered.

"Oh!" Hilda gasped, almost physically. Her intel-

lectual virginity was in serious danger, and she had the native decency to realize it. She ran hurriedly to ground.

"Do you think Colonel Tracey is happy here?"

Livingstone paused for a moment before answering. If he said "Yes," she would be jealous of the old home, the woods and the rich turf which would content a perverse son of woman born for other joys: that much was common sense. But if he said "No," she would try to hold George down—a test of strength with Quex which she would certainly win hands down.

"He wants a wife and an occupation," Livingstone answered after a pause.

"And the one won't provide the other?" Hilda replied with a quizzical smile.

"The post-war wife is more of an occasional relaxation than an occupation," Livingstone answered.

"She's not just a servant, if that's what you mean." Hilda assumed the demure pose of a maiden profoundly innocent of matrimonial compliances.

"More of a mistress in other words," Livingstone suggested genially.

"And what do you mean by that remark?"

"I mean that the girls of today live in horror at the idea of 'settling down,' 'keeping house' and all that sort of thing. They regard their husbands as dancing partners, and dancing partners of a rather exacting kind at that. Would you settle down here, for instance?"

"Good God, no!" Hilda answered, with genuine alarm. "But Colonel Tracey wouldn't—"

"Ask you? No, of course not. But you might ask him, which would be quite another matter."

"I hate a man who always says what you know he's going to say, and does what he ought to do . . . the old family feeling, you know . . . the county . . . the estate . . . Surely a man ought to have some individuality of his own?"

"If he regards himself as sufficiently important, he does. But if other people don't share his view of his own importance, it may go hard with him. It's very nice and romantic to wade through slaughter to a throne, but to wade through the police court to the county jail is less pleasing though equally individual."

"Can't a man think for himself without going to jail?" Hilda asked rather angrily.

"Of course, it all depends on his conclusions," Livingstone answered with a smile, "but the point is sometimes overlooked. Surely you don't believe in the new thought?"

"Well, I don't believe in the old thought," Hilda answered with just a shade too much self-conscious satisfaction. "The past generation has made a pretty beastly mess of things."

"My dear Miss Altamont," Livingstone drew himself up on to the top bar of the drive gate and gained a precarious preeminence, "if the world is naturally perfect, the mistakes of the last twenty years are due to the crimes and follies of individuals who ought to be shot at once. That's obvious. But just allow yourself to imagine for a moment that the world isn't perfect, that there's such a thing after all as original sin,

and you see the whole disastrous business of life in a new light. Men struggling against the inherent evil in their nature and making an heroic success of it. Isn't that a more rational view than yours, which sees a universe of perfect individuals just born to express themselves and cruelly prevented—despite their perfection—from doing so by a handful of demoniac fools called Elder Statesmen and accepted as leaders without a single protest from anybody?"

"I don't think you're fair to me," Hilda answered with rare courage.

"No man is ever fair to a woman in an argument," Livingstone replied with a laugh as he descended from his eminence; "we must keep the small start which nature gave us!"

They walked back in silence, Hilda Altamont showing no sign of wishing to catch up. But she had to admit to defeat for all that, for when they got to the house they found everyone waiting for them.

"I've been having my education completed," she said as she ran into the hall. "My political education, I mean," she added with a smile in Tracey's direction. And Tracey felt just a trifle relieved.

Dinner was a formal affair, *Tracey duce et auspice Tracey*. Quex took mental notes busily at every stage of the affair, and was quite obviously impressed. He had a natural lack of breeding which saved him from vulgarity and Tracey was duly grateful. It was a very great relief to Tracey to be freed from the necessity of pretending that the man he was talking to was a country gentleman of the old school. He would have been, no doubt, a little less relieved if he had guessed that

Quex, impressed as he was, was enjoying the luxury of a complacent sympathy for his host, doomed for life, owing to congenital incapacity, to a 2½ per cent. investment. But Quex kept quiet enough to hide his thoughts and contented himself with taking the Empire under his august patronage.

"We've got to realize our assets, Colonel Tracey, if I may put the matter in plain business English."

"That looks like the beginning of a nice little job for two soldiers, don't it, Dick?" Tracey turned to Livingstone for support.

"I think Quex would prefer to keep us out of it," Livingstone replied with a laugh. "He regards the Army as a body of Don Quixotes, mistaking conquest for . . . what's the word I want, Quex?"

"Development," Quex replied, a little uneasily.

"Get the cash and let the credit go to the devil," Tracey interpreted. "The trouble is that the desire for cash isn't exactly confined to Britishers."

"My dear sir," Quex saw his chance and took it, "what the world wants is more of this world's goods to make up a tiny little bit for the waste of the last ten years. Whoever develops any new country today is doing a service to the whole of mankind. That's the true internationalism, the true brotherhood of man; more production, and still more, and still more after that."

"And you really think, Sir Artemas," Hilda asked, "that if we can put an end to these absurd jealousies, and cooperate, there is a chance of real progress?"

"Not a chance; a certainty," Quex responded gallantly.

"Quex never bets except on a certainty," Livingstone interjected.

"It is good to hear a real captain of industry," Hilda put in, with a flushed little smile in Quex's direction, "talking like that. Major Livingstone was trying to infect me with the most terrible pessimism before dinner."

"Frankly, Quex, with his cooperative enthusiasm, makes me nervous," Livingstone retorted, coming up to the scratch at a glance of appeal from Tracey, "for if there's one thing certain in this world, it is that a sincere cooperator would be so completely alone in the world that he'd be shot out of hand by a spontaneous coalition of fanatical individualists."

"You don't really believe that, Major Livingstone," Hilda said almost angrily.

"Of course not," Livingstone admitted, "but I do know that the Roman Empire collapsed not because she didn't develop the resources of the world which Cæsar put at her feet, but because she did. So did Spain; her civilization collapsed after fifty years of Empire."

"That's interesting," Tracey interposed in his slow way; he had an instinctive ear for good sense which atoned for quite a lot of book ignorance. "What do you think is the reason?"

"If you want a short answer, I should say that man couldn't live by bread alone."

"He's got a very poor chance of living without it," Quex said.

"That's true, too," Tracey put in with that infernal fair-mindedness of his which had driven at least two generals to the grave with premature apoplexy.

"My next answer must be longer then," Livingstone said, sitting back in his chair. "How does this do? Men can only live by the sweat of their own brow, or the sweat of someone else's. If they live by the sweat of their own, they're happy, for the simple reason that God made them like that. If they live on other people's, they degenerate, because man is only happy exercising a function, and being supported is not a natural function for an able-bodied Christian. To put it concretely, a man who earns his own living finds naturally the mean between his desire for material comfort and his desire for leisure and physical rest. A man who lives on his wife has no natural check imposed on his desire for comfort and pleasure; on the contrary, the more he gets, the more he wants, because his appetite gets jaded. In the end he spends not only his wife's income, but her capital, and then dies of drink. A country living on its conquests—I beg your pardon, Quex, its developments—is in precisely the same position."

"I won't contradict you again, Dick," Tracey said with a smile, when the oration was over. But Quex took up the challenge.

"My cousin does not do himself justice. He loves an argument, but when it comes to practical affairs he knows on which side his bread is buttered. . . ."

"I'm glad you're not so serious after all," Hilda Altamont said. She had an instinctive social sense that something must be said, and pretty quickly. Besides, she was already just a little sorry for Quex.

"Of course I'm serious," Livingstone said, rather tersely, "and in any case what have I got to do with

the thing, one way or the other? If I sell my soul to Quex that doesn't amount to proof positive that the soul doesn't exist."

"That's a nasty one, Dick," Quex said gamely enough, "but still I don't think you're as black as you'd like to think."

"And what does it all come to?" Tracey asked, after a pause. "Sir Artemas says that we can only keep this old country going by developing (of course, peacefully —Empire development always starts, like war, without a man or a gun in the right place) the resources of the tropics, whether they belong to us or not. Livingstone says that a country can only live on its own resources, a fact about which he seems to be a little fatalistic. Are we to sit down and do nothing because a dago country like Spain went to pieces three hundred years ago?"

"I think that's a horrid notion," Hilda Altamont said. "If I didn't think there was a chance of real progress once we had got rid of these silly racial rivalries I should hate myself."

"Why hate yourself? Why not hate someone else?" Livingstone asked.

Hilda suspected a trap, but couldn't see it. "It would be difficult to feel important, I mean, and serious, and progressive in a world which was fundamentally all wrong."

"And you feel, as it is, that for you it is all great fun."

"Sometimes," Hilda said, adding maliciously, "but hardly when I'm talking to you."

"Of course," Livingstone said with a smile, "if there

were no luxurious men, and no idle men, and no vicious men and no foolish men, the level of material comfort would rise slowly in every generation; but the absolute check on any indefinite growth is the productive capacity of the individual, once due account is taken of his desire for leisure and of the fact that no man can be forced to do more work than he wants to do."

"Ever heard of machinery?" Quex interrupted.

"To which I answer, 'Have you ever heard of the increase in population since the introduction of machinery?' No! I don't think there's much in the machinery argument, once the machinery makers are properly paid. All periods of great prosperity are due to exceptional causes which have one feature always in common: the exploitation of a temporary monopoly of cheap labor. But the production of goods creates the demand for them among the producers, and so in the long run the general average remains much as it was, *plus* the savings of earlier generations, *less* the disastrous waste which goes on every day."

"This is all very cheerful," Quex said. "And here I am risking my little all as a piece of perfectly disinterested pioneer work in the old-fashioned belief that if one adds to the available supply of goods the world will be a better place to live in."

"I must say," Tracey said, "I don't see the flaw in that."

"Nor do I. It sounds splendid," Hilda supported her host with a becoming excitement.

It was curious, Livingstone felt, how everyone disagreed with him. Yet he wasn't wrong. He knew that.

"Of course," he said, "there isn't a flaw. If you *do* add to the world's supply of goods without proportionately increasing the demand we shall grow richer and richer, and instead of complaining about the income tax we shall be complaining about the supertax. But when we've been in Bubuland for fifty years, and started schools and missions, and votes for Bubus over 16 (they mature young in those latitudes), the boot will be on the other leg. Meanwhile we're diverting capital and energy and brains—my brains for one—from the reorganization of our own industries and the employment of our own people."

"But why shouldn't the Bubus have a share of the good things?" Hilda asked.

"Why not?" Livingstone echoed. "I said I was all in favor of it. But whether they'll be any happier with them I don't know."

Old Altamont had said nothing for a long time, but he felt bound to put in a word for the benefit of his host, who was also his client.

"How long will it be," he asked, "before the Italians or the French organize a rising against us?"

"Not a chance," Quex answered, very decidedly. "The whole thing will be kept clear of international complications. The Foreign Office are seeing to that; we shan't move without their backing. Besides, when we go to the public we shall reserve a number of shares for France and Italy and get an international Board."

"That's really practical internationalism," Tracey said grimly.

"I call it splendid," said Hilda for the second time,

and then feeling rather awkward, added: "I mean so really practical, as Colonel Tracey says."

After this the conversation became less serious. Livingstone felt that he had talked enough, and everyone else was certain he had talked too much. Quex in particular was secretly fuming with rage. "The fellow's middle-class economics are insufferable," he thought to himself, and nourished a grievance all the more grateful for being for once quite sincere. Quex believed implicitly in the value of successful business enterprise and had never reconciled himself to the hideous notion that the production of wealth was a matter of duty, self-sacrifice and exertion on the part of those millions of mankind whom he despised as mere drones. His idea was that he made the money and distributed it to his employees, and by now even Corrian had almost given up the attempt to convince him to the contrary. Corrian had indeed asked him only the other day how the world would get on when the present generation of rich men who produced between them all the world's wealth had died. But Quex had been able to show that the supply of rich men always increased with the growth of the population. "God is good," had been Corrian's commentary; Quex had agreed.

But Quex, though he was acutely conscious of nursing a cousinly viper in his bosom, was by no means silent for the rest of the meal. He told good stories of Lloyd George at the War Office and of Sir Eric Geddes, and Sir Auckland Geddes, and Lord Devonport, and even a Bowdlerized anecdote about Lord Soulle. He knew all these great men, especially their

human side. The story of the great dried-fruit contract, under which the Government were to get fifty thousand tons of dates delivered to them two hundred miles inland from Basra every year till 1930 because the official who had made the contract had mistaken a contour line on the map for a railway, was one of the best. And Lord Soulle's comment, "Some date," was one of Lord Soulle's best efforts, according to Quex. Tracey, who had met Soulle once, could well believe it.

"Can't stand the fellow, myself," he said, after a polite but unenthusiastic laugh. "I don't mind a fellow not being a gentleman, if he'd only try. Soulle doesn't."

"A bit of a rough diamond," Quex conceded, "but a stout-hearted fellow."

"In short, a white man," Livingstone said, rather grimly.

"You're too cynical," the irrepressible Hilda put in, "aren't you?"

"If you insist, I shall have to withdraw, I suppose," Livingstone answered, "but I don't honestly like Soulle, and as I've never been in on any of his deals I've no reason for sticking up for him. Of course, he's a great admirer of your sex, Miss Altamont. He's just carried off my cousin's secretary to his harem."

"Has he really got a harem? How delightful! Can I meet him? I should love to—er—er—"

"Join?" suggested Livingstone.

"No, of course not," Hilda answered, flushing with excitement at the suggestion that she was qualified to join the collection of a connoisseur. "But to see how they all like it."

"The modern harem, I'm afraid, is distributed in a number of flats in rather unromantic neighborhoods like Maida Vale, Hampstead and Baker Street. But Soulle might lend you his keys, of course."

"Keys? Who's lost his keys?" Tracey's sister-in-law opened her mouth for the first time.

"I think you're rather beastly, Major Livingstone, to take all the romance out of things in the way you do. I'm sure Colonel Tracey would never be so unkind, would you, Colonel Tracey?"

"I don't think there's much romance in Lord Soulle; I hope he isn't one of your heroes." Tracey assumed a geniality which he hardly felt.

"Major Livingstone has just been telling me he keeps a harem, so naturally I was interested. We like people to take notice of us, you know," Hilda said challengingly.

"But you don't like men who change their minds once a month, do you?" Tracey asked.

"I shouldn't mind in the least, if they let me change it for them. But almost anything is better than a man who never changes. British oak and Cornish granite. Ugh!"

Livingstone suggested dryly:

"You prefer reeds, perhaps. They break so easily."

"Or just a handful of mud?" Tracey said with an almost perceptible sneer. For Tracey had not altogether failed to see Hilda Altamont's reaction to the ingenious Quex with his simple zeal for the cause of progress. Nor had Quex, who, like the Soulle of honor, was a bit of a connoisseur, failed to observe her chal-

lenging vivacity, her conscious poise, her parade of virtue unassailed but not unassailable.

Most of the evening was devoted to bridge, with Tracey and his sister-in-law playing picquet dutifully in a corner so as not to interrupt the serious business. But after dinner, when they were having their coffee, Quex, who was getting a bit restive at the extraordinary way in which all these strange people seemed to live and have their being actually more comfortably than he did, without the slightest reference to his activities or views, had broached the subject of Bubuland with elephantine tact.

"You know, Colonel Tracey, that Dick and I are hoping to interest you in this Bubuland business that seems to be taking up more and more of my time. The Government people are on to me about it every day, asking when we hope to get a real start, but I've made up my mind that not a penny of English capital is to be risked till some independent person has been into the whole thing on the spot."

"I'm afraid I shall be no use to you at all at the present stage," Tracey said. "I know a thing or two about horses and dogs, but cattle and canned-meat factories are off my beat. . . . I thought the thing was pretty cut and dried, else I'd have said at once that there was nothing doing."

"Oh, it's cut and dried all right," Quex explained in his patient way, "but I have to send out an expedition to survey the district properly, to fix possible sites for trading stations and factories, to see to the organization of the cattle ranches, to arrange the start of the mining end of it and so on. I don't know anything

about stock breeding or gold mining, technically speaking. My job is to finance the production end and to sell whatever is produced. The actual working of the show is a matter for technical men, farming experts, engineers, surveyors, builders and all that sort of thing." Quex tried not to let his host see his genuine contempt for these middle-class creatures.

"I still don't see where I could possibly come in," Tracey said, quite uninterested.

"The man we're all looking for is someone who can take charge of all these experts, and generally do the administrative work of the first expedition. We don't want an expert in anything. We want, and must have, an honest man with experience of administration in India or Africa."

"A sort of pinchbeck Cromer," Tracey growled, "to keep the ring, while the shekels are being roped in. Honestly, Sir Artemas, I don't fancy the job."

"Why not, George?" Livingstone asked.

"Because I see nothing behind it but a scramble for cash. I know these countries have got to be opened up, but you can't mix up a purely commercial undertaking with benevolent administration. John Company tried it, and we know where that landed us."

"Without John Company there would have been no Indian Empire," Livingstone answered.

"No, perhaps not!" Tracey said, with an expression of concentrated puzzledom. Quex felt that Livingstone for once, and no doubt out of sheer inadvertence, had helped him, but he began to feel at the same time an almost uncontrollable irritation against Tracey.

"The infernal detachment of the fellow," he said to

Livingstone after breakfast the next morning, "is really insufferable. He doesn't seem to care two pins whether he, I, you, or anyone else lose all their chances on the deal, as long as his highfalutin ideals aren't interfered with. I call it really most discreditable." And Quex made an ineffectual lunge with his walking-stick at a dandelion to show his immense displeasure.

Livingstone looked at Quex out of the corner of his eye. Was his second cousin (by marriage) going mad? Or was this degrading exhibition of greed merely the natural man reacting against a more civilized type?

"You haven't tried the Blue Nile on George yet, have you?" he asked, after a pause.

"Not said a word beyond what you heard last night," growled Quex. "Between you and me, I am afraid the fellow's a dud."

"What on earth do you mean?" Livingstone asked angrily. "In the first place he's a friend of mine, and in the second place he's our host."

"Oh, my dear fellow, I know that." This was said in Quex's most disarming manner. "And a very nice fellow, too . . . charming . . . perfectly charming. But not a man of action."

"Rubbish, my dear Quex," Livingstone said in a milder tone, "what you mean is that he doesn't seem enthusiastically keen on acting in your interests. To which I say that if you can provide him with one single reason why he should, he's your man."

"You surprise me. . . . I shall never understand you fellows. Now what makes you think that?"

"That makes me think that," Livingstone said,

stretching out an arm towards the bottom of the garden where Tracey and Hilda Altamont were walking.

"But if you ever let old George down, Quex . . ." Livingstone paused significantly.

"Have I ever let anyone down?" Quex asked peevishly. "You are an extraordinary fellow. You do an infernal lot of work, you invest your last cent in my companies, you take a salary from me, and all the time you hint and hint and hint."

"Hint what?" Livingstone asked. He'd had all this a hundred times before and enjoyed it thoroughly.

"Hint that there's something just not quite straight about me which puts you on one plane up there and me on another down there."

"You've got a rotten conscience, Artemas Quex, that's what's the matter with you. . . . Come and talk to George, while I give that girl a few more injections of the anti-progress bacillus."

Quex went along with his cousin. There was nothing else for him to do. But he nourished his grievance all the same. His grievance at being found out. What man on God's green earth can have a worse grievance than that?

Quex striding over Tracey's sixteenth century turf, missing the shops and the motor-busses acutely, certainly looked unhappy. Livingstone's heart—almost as sensitive as his pocket—was touched. But he said nothing. He had certain loyalties which meant nothing to his successful second cousin (by marriage) and he felt that Quex must be left to fight his own battles.

They exchanged conventionalities with Tracey and

Hilda Altamont for ten minutes or so, while the sun beat down on Quex's bowler and made the dust sparkle in its beams.

"Do you *always* wear hats like that, Sir Artemas?" Hilda asked maliciously.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Altamont," Quex answered apologetically. The creature was fascinating but foolish.

"There speaks the George Washington of Maiden Lane," Livingstone commented.

"A comparative George Washington?" Tracey said with a laugh.

"You're very hard on the poor business man, Colonel Tracey," Quex said confidentially. "Come and tell me the worst of your suspicions." And the born tactician walked off with the accomplished staff officer a helpless victim.

Livingstone exchanged glances with Hilda Altamont.

"He won't let George escape if he can help it," was Livingstone's comment.

"He won't if I can help it," was Hilda's.

The two looked at each other. Worlds, æons, divided them, but the inexorable hand of Fate in the person of George Tracey of all people had thrown them together.

For ignorance was Hilda Altamont's birthright. Ignorance intensified by higher education. It was a disastrous heritage and yet she faced the future without a qualm. Her own future and George Tracey's too. Nobody but an educated woman could have done that.

"I think it's a splendid chance," she went on after a pause.

"For whom?" The question was as inevitable as the answer.

"For anyone who is a man."

"But I thought you were a Little Englander, internationalist, Bolshevik, communist, and everything that was up to date. You oughtn't to approve of this commercialized kind of imperialism."

Hilda Altamont was ready for this, of course. She was ready for most things on that glorious morning, and felt very much less impressed by Livingstone's milk-and-water cynicism—mellow pessimism, he would have called it himself—than she had in the fading twilight of the evening before. By such small things as the shadow of the morning sun on old turf or the murmur of the wind in tall trees are the fates of empires decided. Hilda Altamont, of course, didn't see it like that. Neither did Cleopatra. She just thought Mark Antony splendid and Cæsar rather a dear. And in this case it was Tracey's fine figure and keen eye and sonorous deep voice that sneered at pretenses which moved this child of the twentieth century to pity. The world was moving forward to a new age. Her age. And she wanted to collect a piece of solid good old furniture to take along with her. Things might be uncomfortable otherwise.

"I hate men who stand still," was what she said in self-defense, but she seemed to think it singularly conclusive.

"I prefer them to men who run away," Livingstone commented.

"You're always saying things like that, Major Livingstone. You don't understand what I mean. Your cousin's scheme is quite beyond me. I don't understand canned meat and gold mines. But I do see that he wants to do something concrete, something new, instead of just pottering about, complaining that things aren't what they were. And Colonel Tracey has got an awful inclination just to potter. I believe in all new movements on principle. It's a matter of instinct, I suppose."

Livingstone laughed.

"You don't mean to say you believe in Quex?" he asked innocently.

The girl stamped her foot—a gesture, undoubtedly, —and looked him full in the face.

"I believe in Quex twenty times more than I believe in you and twice as much as I believe in Colonel Tracey, though he *is* rather a dear. So now you know the truth. You see, I'm an impertinent modern who says what she thinks."

"And says it very charmingly, too," Livingstone said, looking in the opposite direction.

"I don't think you believe a word I say," Hilda said, ignoring the compliment.

"Not a word," Livingstone answered. "Do you?"

"I don't believe in believing. I believe in experimenting and judging by results."

"The wisdom of the centuries boils down to that, does it? Isn't it rather expensive?" Livingstone wanted to bring in Russia, but felt it to be rather unfair. The material ruin of the richest nation in the world was so patent a fact that even the stanchest of

Whigs felt there must be a catch somewhere. Otherwise everything they had said about communism would be true!

It was the same old difficulty that the Army had been in, in 1918, when they couldn't bring themselves to think that the German morale was really cracking, though they had been saying so for two years. Also that the English were man for man superior to the Germans. Officers of the old school had had their insuperable doubts about that too.

So Livingstone and the girl had walked on round the gardens in silence, while Quex and Tracey discussed Bubuland seriously for the first time.

Tracey was certainly in a more congenial mood than on the evening before. Quex admitted as much, rather grudgingly, when he told Livingstone the result of the interview. But it seemed that they had got no further forward. Livingstone's feelings were mixed. He was anxious, of course, for Tracey to come in, because he had the pride of the amateur in his "stunt," and his "stunt" in this case was to fit together the curiously ill-assorted specimens of humanity who were being drawn by the dominance of Quex's personality, or mere greed, or the desire for appearances, or even sheer inertia, towards this extraordinary enterprise. He had indeed his full share of the amazing versatility of his race, which has led the generality of our countrymen throughout history to defy the prophecies of experts and the machinations of statesmen often without rhyme or reason and always without ulterior motive.

Livingstone had himself smiled often at this unbelievable disinterestedness of Englishmen in the mass,

which stood out so clearly to foreigners as a very perfidious hypocrisy and to himself as the simplicity that passes all understanding. Yet Dick Livingstone quite failed to see how much he himself had of this particular weakness which makes England the rich man's playground and the cemetery of so many of the hopes of mankind. Had he analyzed his own feelings as keenly as he had the power to do, he would have known that he also was anxious for George Tracey's complaisance because he wanted a guarantee, which George Tracey alone of them all could give, that there was nothing about the scheme so indecently commercial as to make disinterestedness—the doing of a thing just for the sake of doing it, success just for the sake of succeeding—an impossibility.

And when Quex came back with a puzzled expression of irritation which told him that the mission had been a failure, Livingstone was more disturbed for the shock to his sensibility than for the possible breakdown of the enterprise.

"Oh, he was charming about the whole business," Quex answered to Livingstone's unspoken inquiry, "but he doesn't like the idea of sitting in judgment on what he calls 'those rascally contractors.' He hasn't got the guts for the job, that's the plain fact. No doubt he's tired out. Thirty-five years in the East and all that. But it's the Government behind him that he really wants. A man who's been born in leading strings."

"It's not the Government, but a moral force behind him that George wants. You don't get within a mile of understanding him, Quex. Here you've got the old Puritan with his Bible, mixed with the Cavalier with

his King. The result is a man who can do at a pinch without one or the other but not without both."

"Well," Quex said with a shrug of the shoulders, "I tried him with a bit of progress dope, talked about missionaries and western civilization . . . The white man's burden . . . not a bit of use. The fellow's charming, but a dud, Dick. We've wasted our time. I hate wasting time."

And the strong man who hated wasting time lit a cigarette and looked reproachfully at the Vanbrugh façade of the old house as if to say: the man who built this had no idea of the value of time.

"What'll Miss Altamont have to say to this?" Livingstone asked. The born staff officer who had never been allowed within a mile of the Staff College was searching round almost unconsciously for new strings to pull. He would show that the Livingstones were not to be defeated as easily as the Quexes.

"That girl!" Quex said with almost indecent emphasis of her sex. "I like that girl . . . If Tracey hadn't backed out I might have seen a bit more of her. Not a bad secretary, eh?"

"I think you'd find her a little less amenable than her predecessor," Livingstone remarked.

"Less amenable?" Quex exclaimed contemptuously. "She wouldn't be amenable at all . . . that's what I like about her."

"Something of a novelty?" Livingstone queried. "Anyway, I'm going to look for her."

Leaving Quex still gaping at the first gentleman's home he'd ever stayed in, which symbolized for Quex all the futile parade of complacent inactivity which

made his life even in post-war England more difficult than it ought to be, Livingstone walked up the worn old steps that led into the hall. He found only Altamont and the mythical sister-in-law whose name he hadn't yet really discovered. It was Mrs. Horne Johnson or Mrs. Gore Thompson or Mrs. Hume Robinson, he fancied. Anyway it was just what one would expect, which somehow made conversation easier than the good lady's natural powers in that direction might have suggested. So he sank down into an armchair and began to talk about Quetta. She obviously would know all about that, even if she had been a little lost in discussing Lord Soulle.

"Oh yes . . . we were there in 1906, when the Devons were there . . . Colonel Gore Thompson—Oh, yes, he was my husband."

Now Livingstone knew. He felt relieved. He had, of course, never met the gallant Colonel, but the ruse was, he felt, justified as it was so infernally awkward not to be quite sure whom you were talking to. He turned to Altamont, and asked him, as one does, whether he had ever been in India. Of course he hadn't. "They never have," Livingstone reflected somnolently, and woke up to find himself saying that "it must all be very different now."

That started it, of course, and Livingstone was immensely relieved when he heard a plaintive murmur about "natives" and "disloyalty" from the Colonel's widow.

"You're not allowed to call them natives now, you know," he said maliciously; a cat watching a mouse.

"Not allowed! No wonder they're getting above

themselves. What do you call . . . er . . . er . . . these people now?"

"Indians, I believe, is the official term," Livingstone explained. "Very curious, isn't it, how things change!"

"I don't know what my husband would have said," echoed the voice from the past.

"He'd have gone on saying natives like everyone else, I expect," Livingstone laughed.

"Do you think there'll be trouble soon?" Altamont asked.

It was all so delightfully inevitable, and Altamont was such a perfect fit. Livingstone's historical mind could picture generations of Altamonts wondering whether there would be trouble and generations of Gore Thompsons facing trouble good and hard every day of their lives without saying a word about it beyond an occasional grouse about the servants. And no one understanding—not even the Mrs. Gore Thompsons—that it was touch and go from year to year, and that we were working for our hold on India harder than any nation had ever worked for anything, and without expecting a penny. "Any trouble"! Livingstone had spent five years of his life at D.I.K. commanding that desolate frontier post, and holding it virtually single-handed, with robberies and murders going on all day long and only a handful of faithful Pathans to maintain the majesty of Empire along a hundred miles of frontier amid the primitive savagery of virgin hills and the untamed majesty of fighting races.

Suddenly his reverie was interrupted as Hilda Altamont ran into the hall from Tracey's study.

"The devil!" Livingstone said. "You seem in a

hurry. Are you trying to catch up with modern thought, or something of that kind?"

But Hilda Altamont was not in a mood to exchange dialectics. She was touching reality for the first time, the amazing reality of power and the gigantic illusion of its predestined significance. The joy of victorious battle was in her eyes. What had she been getting the better of, Livingstone wondered; George Tracey's conscience or his pride, or his ancestry, or just his assumed indifference to the sullen charm of those gray eyes of hers which were so scornful of mere masculinity? It had not been easy, he guessed; and he was right.

It had begun, of course, with Tracey making up his mind. Quex quite unconsciously had decided that in the first moment of their talk by saying, out of sheer force of habit, that if only he could keep the show on a business footing, with no Government officials messing about with the middle-class methods, everything would be all right. Of course George Tracey hated the politicians, but equally, of course, he hated them because he imagined them to be business men, not because he knew they were not. And he saw himself with a good deal more insight than Quex gave him credit for, as the man who, in the eyes of the British public, was to stand for the appearance of decency which was so important a commercial asset in a puritan country. So Tracey, after a show of argument, had said "No." A final, definite "No." Not even a "No, thank you."

And then he had gone to tell Hilda. Even on his way to find her he wondered why he was doing it; and, oddly enough, that was just what Hilda had asked

him; he could find no answer. She had pierced his armor at the first exchanges.

"Did you think I should be interested?" she asked.

What in that fateful moment passed through George Tracey's mind can hardly be put down. He had felt, he supposed, that he was letting the girl down somehow in refusing Quex's confoundedly generous offer to buy him up as so much whitewash for his dirty job. She had thought it all so fine, and he was destroying her illusions. Yet he couldn't confirm her faith in the virtues of that miserable company-promoting fellow in that absurd bowler hat, who didn't know the difference between a pheasant and a partridge, and thought you could buy a gentleman for £2,000 a year. No, that would never do. But now she was asking him a straight question, and he hadn't got the answer pat. What a damned fool he was!

"You seemed so interested last night . . ." he stammered after a long pause, while those gray eyes looked at him just a little scornfully.

"And you want to show me in so many words that you don't care." The scorn was giving way to anger.

"No, my dear," Tracey said, very gently for him, and Hilda wondered; "I want you to understand."

"I do understand, and I think you're a coward, Colonel Tracey. You just won't risk it. I don't mean physically, of course."

"Why should we lend ourselves to this sort of thing? We only get tied up in some unsavory company-promoting swindle and find that people have lost their money on the strength of our names. Don't you see, just a little?"

"I think you're horrid about Sir Artemas . . . all of you. Major Livingstone is secretly ashamed of him, and you're afraid of him. He's the only one of you who's ready to go ahead, to do big things, new things, and you won't help because you think you're too fine for ordinary everyday work."

"Isn't this everyday work . . . looking after this estate, farming four hundred acres and keeping up a large place? But it's not showy."

"It's not showy, because it's safe," Hilda said. "I hate people who are always safe."

"Will you always, do you think?" Tracey asked. He was feeling the strain of all her vitality concentrated on him. She looked more beautiful this morning, too.

"Perhaps not, when I'm . . . old . . . finished . . . but till then, yes."

"Then we must say good-by, my dear," Tracey said with a gesture almost studied (pure eighteenth century, Livingstone would have said). "You are far too charming to be hated by."

"What if I refuse to say good-by?" she asked, consciously alluring.

"I should take what was offered." Tracey had ceased to be serious. It was his only safeguard.

"Without giving what was wanted in return. Is that the new chivalry?"

Tracey was trapped. He had inherited the manners but not the cynicism of his ancestors. He should have played the gay cavalier and snatched her kisses and left her to repent at leisure. But he had always played fair. All the Traceys had played fair, or so he liked to pre-

tend, though a glance at his history books would have corrected the impression which a Victorian upbringing had so sedulously created out of the storied past.

If he had known the truth about those cavalier ancestors of his with their swarthy complexions and roguish smiles, or even about his eighteenth century forebears with their grossness shorn of any superfluous romance by the treaty of Utrecht with its attendant haze of port, things might have been different; but the prejudices of our parents die harder than the dreams of our youth, and so George Tracey felt in duty bound to bargain with the devil for what he might—who knows?—have taken for nothing.

"I'd do a thousand things for you which I wouldn't do for anyone else . . . if you asked me," he said at last, and stopped to kiss her forehead. It was the poorest pretense of passion, but the imagined moment held his unimaginative soul in bondage.

Did she care? That suburban virginity of hers had had an infernally narrow escape, Livingstone gathered from her triumphant reticence after the event, but there was no feeling left in her when the scene was over. What did it all amount to? She had beaten British oak into shape and reduced Cornish granite to the outward seemliness of a memorial tablet in a Surbiton tabernacle—a memorial to something no less memorable than the egotism of a stockbroker's adopted daughter.

"For me?" she asked with a last effort to get at least within scorching distance of the flames—for she was a romantic little suburban.

"Yes, my darling, for you," he said, and kissed her

again—on the lips this time, but with an irritating tenderness which she remembered.

"Then go to Bubuland," she said, and burst out laughing. It was really too ridiculous that the place should have a name like that. It just spoilt things . . . like Lenin and Trotzky.

It was then that she had run out of the room into the arms—figuratively speaking—of Dick Livingstone, discussing the future of India with her uncle. No wonder she hurried out into the sunlight. Her sunlight, she thought for a moment, and then caught sight of Quex's bowler hat among the rhododendrons at the bottom of the drive. She ran to him.

"Oh! how funny you look," she said, stopping dead in front of him, very flushed and out of breath.

CHAPTER NINE

THE offices of the Bubuland Exploration Expedition were in Pall Mall—a small concession to Tracey, Quex liked to pretend, but in reality of a piece with the whole amazing achievement in the creation of appropriate atmosphere.

Dick Livingstone, at last in a staff officer's billet, and Tracey, at last freed from the hideous nightmare of office work, were the pillars of the most discreet façade which Quex had ever devised as a screen for his rascality. Yet even Quex was sublimated by the honest excitements of those extraordinary weeks . . . and just a bit, perhaps, by Hilda Altamont, who liked to pretend—she was, as we found out, good at pretending—that she had come to town for the season.

To move five hundred men from Dover to Calais is a pretty big task even in the height of a European war, when the transport services of half the civilized world are bent to the task. At least, there are men prematurely gray in every one of the Service clubs who did little else and wore themselves out doing it, if we may believe what they say. But that sort of thing was child's play to the task thrown on Tracey and Livingstone by Quex's virgin audacity. For, to give him credit, there was a quality of at least vicarious virginity about Quex's imperialistic exuberance. Gain, not

glory, perhaps, but still the imagination was kindled by a dream, and there are men and women in Kensington of whom that cannot be said. By a dream—but, of course, also by those gray eyes which were speeding them all to ruin and desolation as surely as ever did those of Helen of Troy, and perhaps by no means so innocently. Who can tell? There was no one to throw the first stone.

The trouble was that everything had to be prepared in secret, and the whole expedition had to be launched into Bubuland without so much as a warning even to those whom Tracey persisted in calling the railway authorities. There were, it was true, no railways within fifty miles of the Bubuland frontier, and no authorities at all on the far side of it. But as Tracy and Livingstone tried hard to explain, movement across country was just as dependent on transport in Bubuland as in England, and it didn't matter a tinker's curse whether you ordered your camel or your pack mules or your Ford. The essential thing was to order something. And when a soldier talked about the proper authorities it didn't necessarily mean a Cook's representative or a highly polished railway transport officer. A corrupt Bedouin or a Levantine ex-secret-service man, or an Italian prostitute, might be the appropriate channel for communication. The principle was the same.

Of course there was going to be publicity—in good time. But the situation was too tricky for any premature announcement. That was Quex's account of it. The truth, of course, was that the Soulle of honor was shivering in his shoes. The General Election was still impending; for the moment things looked a little

better; but it was certain that once the country got a chance it would take it. Even the Whigs had been stirred out of their lethargy and talked with some confidence about honor and the traditions of decency in public life; and once that sort of thing became common the game was up. So the order had gone forth to sit very tight—at least in a figurative sense. The merest hint of any movement involving new and dangerous responsibilities would be seized on by the press and made an issue of life and death. Absolute disinterestedness was all right in theory, but Soulle knew well enough that this, like a good deal of the Government linen, wouldn't wash in public.

Of course, it was quite another matter if the gallant band of explorers were well on their way to the source of the Blue Nile before anything was heard of them. Public attention could then be directed to the proper points of interest, and with luck no one would connect that famous big-game shot George Tracey with such things as secret concessions; still less would any suspect him of a secret understanding with the Soulle of honor.

And public opinion would be right. George Tracey to the last never suspected that that great statesman had been a party to the affair in its earliest stages. Still less did he imagine that by keeping the preparations dark, he was helping on a first-class political ramp. If you were going into the wilds, you just went. You didn't talk to the newspapers about it. If you did, you didn't usually go much further than to engage a double bedroom at Shepheard's. Oh yes, George Tracey knew all about those desert promenaders, those Wardour

Street explorers of byways, camp followers in the army of emancipation. He had agreed "with both feet" to a total absence of any newspaper talk.

Besides, as Quex pointed out, they didn't "want to be pestered by an army of touts."

Secrecy is infectious. Once it is agreed on, it becomes a matter of course. By the time the office had been in existence for a week, neither Tracey nor anyone else bothered himself to inquire why there was no brass plate on the door, and why the word Bubuland was taboo in even the most private of private letters. For one thing there was too much work to do, and Quex was the hardest worker of them all, which did away with a lot of suspicion lurking at the back of Tracey's mind. Quex's dream was that no expedition was ever going out better equipped, with every detail planned out in advance. And if it was not strictly "in the cause of science" that no expense was to be spared, it was at least true that botanists, zoologists, geologists, geographers, mining experts, railway experts, chemists, and every other kind of specialist in applied science were to be represented. It was a brilliant idea, which enabled all the essential experts to be concealed in a crowd of enthusiastic young scientists, big-game shots and hard cases. It had caught Quex's imagination, just as it would have caught Northcliffe's. It was thorough.

"If there isn't money in it, there ought to be," he said to Soulle one day, when that experienced politician was warning his friend against letting his enthusiasm run away with him.

"I don't care, Soulle," Quex had said finally. "I've a kind of feeling that it'll pay 100 per cent. in the long

run. Besides, one must put something in the shop window; just think of the publicity."

"Useful if any silly fool asks a question, I agree," Soulle grunted; "but you don't realize that there's no such thing as gratitude. . . . Look at my secretary. I take her out to dinner, private room . . . champagne . . . everything a girl can want . . . and what does she do? Ring up in the morning to say she's not well and won't be able to come till tomorrow. That's human nature."

"*Your* secretary, did you say?" Quex asked innocently.

"Well, your secretary, if you want to know. I suppose I oughtn't to have told you." Soulle's wink was the last trace of his early Victorian upbringing. "She's hot stuff, by George . . . a fine girl. Where did you pick her up?"

"I didn't," Quex said. He was afraid of men who talked about their women. "I thought you wanted a secretary, not a mistress," he added virtuously.

"Damn it," the Soulle of honor interrupted; "can't a Minister dine with his secretary without being talked about? . . . They all did it during the war, except Lestrade, who isn't human. You don't understand feminism; that's what's the matter with you." And the great statesman, who did, looked down from his point of vantage on the embryo statesman who had so much to learn.

It was curious, indeed, how people underrated Quex. Nothing, as a rule, irritated Quex more than this extraordinary fact; it seemed somehow to show there was something not quite twentieth century about

him. But on this occasion the laugh was on his side. Most emphatically on his side. Rose had obviously done what she was expected to do, and the touch of intimacy which this lent to his own relationship with Soulle was going to be valuable. Soulle's salary, for one thing. That £10,000 a year had halved itself in Quex's mind before he got back to his office after lunch.

But Quex kept the financial aspect of Bubuland pretty discreetly in the background. Perhaps he even forgot it on occasion, when on the long summer evenings in Pall Mall he used to sit down to honest work with George Tracey, Livingstone, an engineer or two, and young Robinson the racing motorist, brought into all this by some strange freak of gratitude on the part of Hilda Altamont, who had refused him twenty times over and was good-natured enough now to send him at least to a potential grave in which to bury the fading recollection of his broken heart.

Quex was surprised to find the novelty of the whole business actually exhilarating. Literally, never in the whole twenty-two years of his money-making had he done an honest day's work. Or even a dishonest one. In the early days of the Boscombe Syndicate he used to browse about the firm's books and disinter from the limbo of bad debts and forgotten speculations the incredible ineptitudes of poor Uncle John or the drunken gambols of bibulous Uncle Barnabas. And in the early days of Quex's Stores he had done a lot of buying and selling with a certain meretricious slickness which impressed the staff. But nothing like this. My God! nothing like this. Yet the cloud was not wholly

silver-lined. For it came to him one evening that this sort of thing was what other men were doing every day; hard slogging work, while he and his fellow supermen were just skimming the cream. A pleasant thought, to a mere scoundrel, but to Artemas Quex, Sir Artemas Quex, the great Quex, almost Lord Quex, profoundly disquieting. These Army fellows seemed to insist on getting down to details in a way that was, of course, very creditable, but surely very childish too. Was it possible that Empires were built up by attention to detail of the sort that in the wide world of commerce was left to clerks on thirty shillings a week? And if so, what was to be said for Empires as business concerns? Was it possible that they were not, after all, a 100 per cent. investment?

Quex thought over all this very often in that desperately busy summer, and only towards the end did Corrian throw a sudden shaft of reassuring light on the dark horizon. "They work because it's for the country, not for themselves, my dear Quex," he had said in his superior way. "Don't disturb yourself; they'll show infinitely less zeal when it comes to parceling up the loot. Besides, you've got the benefit of a long experience of petty jobbery behind you. I don't suppose George Tracey has ever done more than stretch a point over a claim for traveling expenses, and probably he made a mess of that."

Yet if Quex's business sense was reassured, his vanity was still a little piqued. For at Pall Mall he was not "the Boss," "the Gov'nor," the "Big Noise," or whatever piece of vulgarity the welfare supervisor had popularized for the moment among the office staff in

the interests of voluntary overtime and a 25 per cent. dividend. At Pall Mall, he was only one among a band of workers who seemed, as far as he could make out, genuinely interested in their work and entirely indifferent to any possible profit from it. Of course, he couldn't entirely blame them for that, since he never intended any of them to make a farthing out of it; but they didn't seem even grateful to him for letting them work for him . . . they had, it was clear, absolutely no sense of proportion. He had put up the capital (at least his friends had) and they were spending it without any consciousness of their indebtedness to him. Yet they did more in a day than, and made him do at least half as much as, the most servile clerk would do in a month.

The extraordinary thing about it was that, as the result of all this inexplicable and—so Quex felt in his bones—faintly discreditable activity, the expedition was ready to start five months after that historic week-end at Tracey Hall, when Hilda Altamont had sent them all off red-hot on the scent of fame and fortune.

Of course, it was only Hilda Altamont who had kept Quex up to the job. As an employer telling George Tracey his way to the source of the Blue Nile he must have been a ridiculous failure. Even in the twilight of love, Tracey could have seen through that impudent imposture. But, as a fellow worker, Quex was intangible, to say the least of it. And Hilda kept him at work day after day with a truly feminine indifference to his obvious *malaise*. She had attached herself to Tracey, but she had attached Quex to herself at least equally effectively. She used to provoke him beyond

endurance, and then slide out of the room with an impudent invitation to dinner which never came to anything, as far as Livingstone could make out.

"She puts a price on herself, all right," Quex said approvingly after one particularly outrageous scene when she had come in from Tracey's room with a list of six inquiries to be made by telephone at once, "else George and I will never get to the Berkeley in time to get a table."

"Yes," Livingstone had answered, "it's a one-sided affair," only to be pulled up—startled out of his wits—by hearing Quex say "So far" in a tone of Napoleonic solemnity.

"What do you mean?" Livingstone asked. "You know they're engaged."

Quex had said nothing, but the incident taught him a lesson. He hadn't forgotten her simple question in the garden at Tracey Hall on that wonderful Sunday morning, when she had made fun of his bowler hat glistening in the sun, and had asked him the question which had echoed in his ears ever since: "You wanted me to make him, didn't you?"

It was really then that the dream had been born. Up to then it had been just a piece of business. The sort of shabby pen-pushing, figure-fudging business which meant power and influence, and friendly smiles from rich men, and ten minutes on the mat outside his door for those others who lacked the indefinable "business sense" which set the rich and fortunate apart in a world suddenly, in the last ten years, grown so near to perfection. But at that moment he had realized that something was wanting. Other men had found

out much the same thing, as Quex dimly realized, but not to others the easy chance of fulfilling the dream, perhaps even on a dividend-paying basis.

Hilda Altamont had been, perhaps, quite hopelessly wrong in thinking that there was something fine about the Bubuland scheme as it first presented itself to Quex's rather suburban mind. But she had brought to it herself something which really was not altogether ignoble, and she was seeing to it now that that something was not quite buried in the rapidly accumulating files.

She had seen it from the first as a precarious fragrance to be caught only on a favoring breeze, a tender blossom of decency struggling to maintain itself in an atmosphere quite ludicrously unfavorable. Livingstone's modulated cynicism would have found pleasure in noting its slow death. Quex would actually have denied its presence. Only George Tracey could nourish it into enduring life. And so while Quex with cumbersome and futile vaporing had tried and failed to entrap one honest man to the service of his own ambition, Hilda Altamont had actually succeeded in throwing over the enterprise in the interests of her more disinterested egotism an element of actual honesty. And the test of her success was the adhesion of George Tracey, and the fact that in a covert and grudging way Quex was proud of Tracey.

He had fought a little at first. He had wanted publicity just to salt the ground, to bait the trap, to tickle the palate of the public which loves the hardships of others. And the exploration *motif*, the geological survey, the search for new flora would have remained, if

he had had his way, the merest improvisation. But he had not had his way. On the contrary, Hilda Altamont had had hers. So, "no expense was being spared," and Quex was working ten hours a day.

When the expedition was ready to start, Quex surveyed the final plans with genuine pride. What was to be built on these exotic foundations was his secret still, but he took a workmanlike pleasure in contemplating foundations not inherently unsound. He had labored, and "the laborer," as he said to Corrian, "is worthy of his hire." That it was a form of worthiness which does not normally provide an income of £10,000 a year didn't for a moment occur to this new, disinterested, almost attractive materialization of Artemas Quex. He was going to keep what he had got, and he was going to get a great deal more. But the fact that he had acquired, in the process, a new set of qualities which gave him a standing in a world whose values were still a little distorted, gratified quite immensely his secret if slender ambition for moral worth.

Dick Livingstone had noticed this strange development with complete cynicism. He knew his Quex. This feverish search for a moral basis for a piratical enterprise was just natural. From the sublime heights of his moral isolation, he watched Quex dipping into his private purse to the tune of nearly £10,000 with an unaffected absence of admiration. Tracey might form what judgment he pleased, but Dick Livingstone was not going to lend himself for a moment to stimulate George's naturally generous imagination to any profound belief in Quex's altruism. As far as things had gone, the show was quite straight. But he refused

to agree with Hilda Altamont, who persisted in saying that it was "rather fine."

Of course, he had to be more careful with Tracey himself. His loyalty to Quex, his employer, demanded that. He never said anything to disinterest Tracey, any more than he had said a word (or hardly a word) to interest him. But with Hilda Altamont it was different. For she was living in a dream, and a daily dose of pinpricks was good for people in that condition. The major part of her dream was, of course, that she was in love with George. The other part was that she was helping to lay the foundations of a new era of progress based on the development of the resources of the subtropical belt.

"Clapham and Cambridge" was Livingstone's verdict on these twin fallacies, which only served to make him thankful for the thousandth time that his own education had been so fortunately restricted. The troop of enthusiastic young scientists whom Quex had collected were another warning that in its endless revolutions the world was not yet a paradise of reason.

They were keen, disinterested, clever and not unduly ambitious. Utterly devoid of greed, and almost of personal vanity, they were really charming to talk to. But the celebrated discussion about the chimera in the void showed a prosaic condescension to practical detail compared with the generality of their abstract concoctions.

The biologist had been spending two years breeding lizards with the object of inducing the inheritance of acquired characteristics. It appeared he had succeeded

so well that wars were to cease and the Jews were to lose their racial characteristics. What the Jews thought of the impending loss of characteristics which, with all their disabilities, have made them the greatest purely racial force in history was not said, but the idea that deductions based on the actual history of the Jewish people over four thousand years were valid against those obtained from a hazardous experiment with the entrails of lizards was apparently quite unscientific. Progress was at last well on foot.

The two anthropologists—both specialists of such an exalted refinement that neither could understand a word the other spoke—were less informative about the future, but the amount of detail which they could supply about prehistoric times was staggering. That their cosmogony was in essence different from all the other cosmogonies was not apparent at the first glance, but science had stepped in, so Livingstone had learned, to divide truth from error with unerring divination, and the easy development from the slug to the superman was, with one or two gaps, "a matter on which all schools of thought are agreed." True enough this dramatic progress would have taxed the limited credulity of the dark ages far beyond breaking point, but there were only giants in those days to interpose between God and his creation. Now they had the Neanderthal man.

The chemists were the best of the bunch, far and away, for they admitted at once that they were precisely the same in every way as their predecessors, and also that they had, by some inexplicable coincidence, got no further in their researches except on the lines

of analysis and synthesis. The miracles of chemistry were miracles of achievement, not guesswork, and they had the added charm of not being in the least miraculous.

Livingstone, however, soon found that the chemists were regarded as very small beer in the scientific world.

It was very different with the physicists and the mathematicians. Some physicists had invented the ether, and other physicists had proved not that it didn't exist, but that it needn't exist. A curious parallel, this, with the conception of the Divinity, but the parallel broke down, so Livingstone found in conversation, because the physicists had the scientific outlook which the metaphysicians so deplorably lacked.

The physicists, of course, were the lawmakers of the scientific world, and as such were in a very special position. True, they were scientific lawmakers, and this meant that they canceled or repealed their laws fairly frequently when they were incontrovertibly shown to be wrong, but till any misfortune of this kind arose it was highly unscientific to dispute their authority. Their attitude was to Livingstone extremely attractive. "Show us where we are wrong and we will agree to be right," was, as a slogan, so much more charitable than the theological attitude which reserved for those outside the hierarchy the possibility of error. The fact remained that a "working hypothesis" sublimated into a "law" was a conception precisely the same as the theologian's "truth revealed by reason" codified into a "dogma." Unfortunately, however, dogmas had an annoying habit of remaining unassailed by many hundreds of years of inquiry, while

"laws" seldom lasted a decade. It gave men scope, but it was slightly disquieting, since it appeared that progress, in the scientific sense of the term, depended on laws and was merely hindered by dogmas. The dogma of original sin, for instance . . . a very nasty conception responsible for all sorts of sexual inhibitions and thus for much of the greed, crime, and war-mongering which disfigured our planet. If there had been no such belief the evidence for it would obviously never have come into existence. The churches had more to answer for than those not well acquainted with enlightened educational ideals could possibly guess.

This particular facet of truth was forcibly impressed on Livingstone by the anthropologist to the expedition, who had picked the ripe fruit of the new humanitarianism from a golden bough, so Livingstone gathered, and was now setting out to sow the seed, though not above collecting a little more evidence for his beliefs on the way. His way led through Bubuland, and the bough was regilded with five hundred guineas of Quex's money.

The natives of the lower reaches of Bubuland were, of course, decidedly primitive, and the anthropologist expected to find more corroborative evidence of the thesis ("though of course it is now generally admitted") that all religions had a common origin in a limited number of nature myths born of an equally limited number of psychological complexes, most of them with a physiological basis and all of them with an eschatological tendency. Simple explanations such as this threw a flood of new light, and Livingstone was, as he himself said, quite blinded.

Science had its missionaries, he realized, just like Christianity, or any other Western cult. It was all intensely interesting, and the inquiring spirit, so much more scientific than the teaching spirit, was certainly an immense stimulus to conversation after dinner. This was fortunate, because Livingstone's particular job was to interview all the scientists and the learned societies concerned and sift out from the immense list of their requirements the essential from the non-essential. The experience taught him, inevitably, that scientists, like parsons, have their human imperfections. And like parsons, they were ready enough to endure a joke or two at the expense of their foibles as long as they were looked up to as infallible on their own subjects. Not that they used the word "infallible," but they reached the conclusion negatively by damning everyone as intellectually barren who did not subscribe to conclusions based on scientific evidence, or, as they preferred to say, scientific conclusions based on evidence.

Of course, like the Roman Catholics, the skilful scientific controversialist gave the skeptic a good deal of rope. The origin of life was debatable ground, and the nature of mind. The future life, too, was by no means ruled out as a legitimate speculation, though too precise a definition of the terms and conditions attaching to it was deprecated by the more old-fashioned Fellows of the Royal Society.

But if the scientists were a refreshing intellectual stimulus to Livingstone, they were the eleventh wonder of the world to Quex. He had not met many educated men, and never any on terms of intellectual

equality. Till the dawning of his strange dream, he had contented himself with a passive acquiescence in their mere existence. They produced nothing themselves, as far as his statistics showed, and they cost a great deal to produce. He wasn't such a fool, of course, as to believe in that popular alternative to culture, "a sound commercial education"; he knew the clerk type when he saw it, and he could easily knock it into shape. That in the process of being knocked into shape it should cease to be a clerk was the last thing in the world that he desired.

But now these strange youths from Cambridge came to him as experts on subjects of national importance, to be subsidized in his own interests, not in theirs. They were extraordinarily definite about that, and betrayed no symptom of gratitude for the publicity, "the chance of getting hold of something which you can hold over the rest of your crowd," "the chance of getting in first on to a good thing in your own line of country." All these baits which had brought £50,000 tumbling into his capacious pockets from uneducated worsted spinners and wool brokers in the north (hard business men, with no nonsense about them), fell quite ludicrously flat. "These young men are my equals, I see that," he said sarcastically to Corrian, "but somehow, I have to put up all the money for them. Can you explain it?"

Corrian, of course, could. He could always explain anything, at a price, except the duties of his rather enigmatic post as sales manager to Quex's Stores, which he seldom carried out, and always inefficiently. But he knew Quex and he knew the workaday world,

and, as the go-between, had proved his value long ago, and got well paid for it. There were one or two things for which even Quex paid well, and Corrian's readiness to answer questions when asked by Quex was only less valuable than his stertorous silence when the questions were asked by other people.

"These young men are a set of enthusiastic prigs, Quex, and of great value as ground bait. . . . Don't waste 'em."

"But do you mean to say that all this anthropology, evolution, zoology business is mere youthful gush? What's behind it?"

"The desire for knowledge is behind them, that's why they're so infernally enthusiastic. Unfortunately the discovery that mere knowledge is of no importance is still in front of them. That's why they're prigs. They'll learn, but don't try and teach them."

"My dear Corrian, I'm made to feel a hopeless worm whenever one of them comes into my office. It's they who'll try and teach me."

"Oh, you're quite safe, Quex," Corrian said with his usual directness, "because you've never wanted to learn anything except how to make money, and I taught you that long ago."

"I've forgotten that I owed quite as much as that to you, my dear fellow," Quex said sarcastically.

"Yes, I told you twenty years ago when we first met in that filthy boarding-house in Westbourne Grove that the way to make money was to take it . . . and damned if you didn't go straight off and do it . . . You've been doing it ever since."

"But these young men," Quex said with a laugh—

he had given up trying his anti-socialist propaganda on Corrian—"are taking it from me. I don't see the reason in it."

"Ground bait," Corrian repeated rather wearily.

"Yes, yes," Quex said impatiently. "I see my reason for giving them their handful of pennies to spend up West like the schoolboys they are, but I can't see why they're so infernally satisfied with themselves. If I borrow a five-pound note I may be glad of it, but I don't regard it as a piece of constructive business. These precious scientists seem to think they've done a good turn to society by transferring five thousand pounds out of my pocket to theirs. They're charming fellows, of course, perfectly charming, and the whole thing genuinely amuses me—besides, as you say, there's money in it—but I like to understand people."

It was the most honest utterance Quex had ever achieved, so Corrian told Livingstone afterwards, and it seriously worried the aged apostle of disillusion whose disembodied cynicism had fed for so long like some ascetic vampire on Quex's capacious greed.

Whether Quex ever really solved his problem is doubtful. Hilda Altamont, of course, would have solved it for him in a moment, for, like the scientists themselves, she saw in Quex the inspired man of action, and in the retinue of scientists the pioneers of the new dawn enlisting under his banner. Fellow adventurers in a great cause do not show gratitude to each other, and the attitude of these earnest young men would have been only another proof of her keen-sighted actuality in recognizing in Quex an Empire builder in embryo, needing only the encouragement which great men so

seldom get except from young women gifted with intuition and a high degree of physical charm.

For her charm, and her charms, developed in that perfect summer till the whole personnel of the Bubuland expedition was more or less in love with her. She reserved, of course, her sympathy for George Tracey, and her rare demonstrations of femininity, but her power of seduction was turned on Quex, who used to stand nervously first on one foot then on the other, while she balanced herself challengingly in the doorway and gave him his orders (to be carried out at once) and his invitation (to be fulfilled at some distant but unquestionably romantic hour).

Yet with all her ostentatiously indiscriminate, even impudent, allurements, she held George Tracey fast. He, at least, was faithful. In the long days on the veld years ago in South Africa he had looked into the future and seen an end to his hours of romance, a vision which had kindled a kind of curious fatalism. It was this fatalism, of course, which had sent him back from the Northwest Frontier to Tracey Hall without even a murmur of regret that the end of his active days had come. It was Hilda Altamont who had rekindled his sleeping zest for life and built a bridge between him and this strange world of affairs which he had sworn to cross. He wouldn't turn back, of course, but the real point was that he wouldn't look back. Or even to right or left. He was following the eyes of a girl into a new land reflecting indeed a little of the familiar but utterly different in those values which were all that used to matter. But he was to go unchanged, and was to come back. That was the bar-

gain, as he saw it. It was he, had he known it, who was holding on to Hilda Altamont, but it was the Hilda whom he had left in his garden in Sussex.

The long days of telephoning, letter writing and inspecting collapsible boats and supplies of tinned food, and Crossley cars and tropical kit and rifles and ammunition and revolvers and saddlery and all the other paraphernalia which were necessary, were just the price of his fidelity to her, and gladly endured. The almost daily intercourse with her was just a piece of tantalizing unreality which kindled in him more than a flicker of desire, but only for days that were to come in due season. He was not a talkative man, or observant of people, and never noticed for a moment her excitement over the hundred petty details of organization which he just took for granted as part of his duty, but which she seemed to treasure as an intimate possession. Was it even in those days the motive power behind the expedition and not its leader that attracted her ardent energies and absorbed her restless personality? Who can say? Possibly, if she had been asked, she would have denied it hotly. Possibly, she was faithful; but it would have been as well if someone had just put the question to her. For, perhaps unconsciously, she was evading the issue.

"When I get back," Tracey would begin every other sentence, but "When everything's ready" was the starting-point of Hilda Altamont's speculations. Tracey tried time and again to carry her with him beyond the immediate moment—back again, indeed, to that precious old garden of his where the real Hilda was still standing dazzling in the sunshine. But the mo-

ment held her. It was her moment, for one thing, and her moment would most emphatically end at the lodge gates of Tracey Hall. But it was not only that. She was afraid of Tracey—afraid of his hardness, his mercilessness to himself, his devastating kindness to other people, his fatalism, and his strength. She had conquered it all, and she was radiantly proud of it—as a conquest: but her work ran only in the new world in which their adventure had had its birth. The end of the adventure must be there, too, if it was not to be the end of her triumph also. So she dreamt virginal dreams of fame, fortune and new horizons, and Tracey went on with the day's work like a soldier looking forward to leave but not in the least expecting it before it was due.

Only once, I think, did he ever have a foretaste of disaster. It was when he and Quex and Hilda were lunching together—Quex, of course, was the guest of honor—and Quex was congratulating Tracey, in his best price-cutting manner, on the speed and efficiency of his preparations, which weren't, as a matter of fact, his preparations at all, but Livingstone's.

"Well, I'll admit I've been studying that old map so hard that I feel as if I were back in Bubuland already," Tracey replied, to some compliment of Quex's about his extraordinary thoroughness.

"*Back* in Bubuland," Quex exclaimed. "How well do you know the country?"

There seemed nothing very much in the question, of course, but the tone in which it was asked was—well—not quite conversational.

"Oh, not well, I'm afraid," Tracey said a little

coldly. "I was only there six months, some years ago . . . but not, of course, in the part we're going to now. But you don't mean to say that you didn't know I'd been in the country when you asked me to come in on the show?"

"Of course he did, George," Hilda put in—her Surbiton upbringing had trained her in the art of improvident interruption. "Sir Artemas is only pulling your leg."

Quex said nothing for a moment, so Hilda Altamont set herself—quite thoughtlessly, perhaps—to fill the gap.

"George is such a hardened traveler that he regards the whole business much as we should regard a week-end in Paris."

"And how's that?" Quex asked with his most disarming smile.

"Oh, just a particularly pleasant interruption of the day's work."

"I'm afraid Empires aren't made in a day, Colonel Tracey," Quex pontificated vaguely, with his mind in the grip of that particularly pleasant week-end with Hilda Altamont which he had yet to experience. How typical of her to use that kind of simile and to look as if she meant what she said. "Impudent malice," Livingstone had called it. The fellow was right.

However, Tracey interrupted his train of thought with a sarcastic—

"Surely the modern business man doesn't need even a day for a simple thing like that?"

"Now, you're pulling my leg, Colonel," Quex replied good-humoredly.

"Not in the least, Sir Artemas. But I hope you don't expect me to endure a lifelong exile. . . . Hilda might have something to say to that!"

"George secretly hopes to be back in Sussex in six months, Sir Artemas. . . . We mustn't alarm him too much."

Tracey looked at her.

"Oh, it's to be a long week-end in Paris, is it?" he asked, with an unexpected flash of vivacity. But there was just a suspicion of hardness in his voice. Cornish granite, which Hilda Altamont detested.

Of course they all laughed, and the talk ran on, but neither George Tracey nor Hilda forgot that moment. It was something, of course, which could be explained, and certainly required explanation.

The explanation came a few days later when George asked her straight out whether, if he was really going to Empire building for five years, they hadn't better get married first. Poor George, it hadn't occurred to him that it was the man who had built an empire that Hilda Altamont was marrying, that she was not just a speculator in futures.

"You funny old thing," was all she said. "You wouldn't be able to stay away from me for five years; you know that perfectly well."

"But if things are too difficult for me to get away for more than a week or so? We ought to face the worst?" Her affection, generous enough, was a trifle too elusive for his soldierly taste, and his question was not without anxiety.

"We shouldn't really be happy unless we'd seen the thing through, my dear, should we?" she asked—the

girl merging into the woman in this hour of unsanguine expectation.

"Perhaps you're right, darling," George could only reply—it wasn't in his code to argue with women, of whom according to his rigid outlook there were only two kinds; the first was yours to do what you liked with and the second did what they liked with you. In both cases the man paid the bill, he reflected a trifle grimly. The doctrine that the woman pays had never impressed his essentially practical mind.

"And so things are just going to drift," Livingstone commented to Quex, when they were discussing the strange relations of the two ardent lovers.

"Miss Altamont's too good for Tracey," Quex said rather brusquely. "She'll find it out some day. A fine fellow, your friend Tracey, but without much backbone. He's always looking for something to lean on, and that's why he'd like to hustle the poor girl round to the church before she knows what she's doing."

"Every decent man wants something to lean on . . . even if it's only the cold comfort of a boiled shirt at dinner," Livingstone said, summing up the world with his usual uninterested assurance.

"I don't," Quex replied at once. He hated his cousin in his arbitrary mood. "That's just the difference."

"If I wanted to be rude I should say that the fact that you're different from George doesn't mean that George isn't a decent fellow," Livingstone said with an irritatingly superior smile.

"Yes. . . . Yes," Quex drawled. "But then you never do want to be rude, Dick. That's your trouble."

"And your good fortune," Livingstone answered, and took Quex off to lunch at the "Rag."

As usual, Livingstone was right. Things did drift, and finally they drifted out to Bubuland.

The whole enterprise, seen in the light of its peculiar origin, stands out as a fantastic element in a sordid tragedy. When the crisis came, the public had almost forgotten George Tracey and his cohort of ardent scientists, and took as a matter of long standing the existence of "interests" which had landed the British public with a complex and disastrous problem. And when the crisis was over, and the British flag was firmly planted over the graves of five thousand British soldiers and any number of "natives"—no one, I fancy, bothered to count them—people were actually grateful for those "interests," thanks to which we had won for our race a new Eldorado.

This shows, of course, that Quex's genius was unerring in its insistence on the scientific character of the original expedition. Thanks to this, it had slipped out unobtrusively, with only a few inspired newspaper paragraphs about "a group of brilliant scientists and explorers who, if rumor served, were already, thanks to the munificence of one of our rising captains of industry, on their way to Central Africa to rend from the heart of the Dark Continent the last of her secrets." A few papers added that a famous big-game shot well known in hunting circles was "intimately connected with the organization of the enterprise." To avoid being pestered by "these newspaper fellows," even

Quex had said good-by to them all individually in London, and only Dick Livingstone and Hilda Altamont went down to Southampton to see the ridiculous imposture launched literally into the blue.

When the final moment came, Tracey felt just a little regretful. For all his energy and enthusiasm, Quex had not been exactly convincing as a Mæcenas pursuing fame and fortune with his eyes on the stars. His feet were in the gutter, certainly; that part of it was right to a T—but over the rest of the proceeding was an element of the grotesque which was inevitably displeasing to anyone who happened to be simply, and without qualification, an honest man.

To Dick Livingstone and Hilda, watching from the quay the last farewells of the Bubuland Expedition as their ship took them down Southampton Water, the affair seemed more strange if less disquieting.

"The end of a chapter," said Hilda Altamont, remembering the Victorian resignation of her aunts in the face of the ruthless march of time over the virginity of their favorite nieces.

"No, the beginning of a paragraph," Livingstone answered, merciless to the last in his self-imposed vendetta against romance.

"O you of little faith," Hilda said meditatively, as her eyes, looking out over the stretch of water turned to brilliant opal by the midsummer sun, caught the flavor of the imagined romance from the foam dancing in the sunlight where the bows of the Coronia had broken the iridescent surface of the stream.

"More faith than hope, my dear girl," Dick an-

swered, quite seriously for once. "We stand at a beginning, but a beginning of what? Let's forget about the preface . . . that's over."

"Of course, George will pull it off," Hilda said, answering the question of her heart.

"What will he pull off?" asked Dick, pursuing the logic of his thoughts with complacent persistence. . . . "Wait till Quex has launched his public company . . . then the fun will begin. . . . Wars and rumors of wars. . . . Concessions and counter-concessions . . . and poor George stranded high and dry on a desert with the thieves of five nations denouncing him as a confederate turned traitor."

"If you thought that," Hilda said angrily—by the time their backs were turned to the departing Argosy—"why did you let George go?"

"If you didn't think that, why did you make him go, my dear?" Livingstone answered gently. "You had your dream of exalted enterprise. . . . Don't complain if I prophesy that other people may find the enterprise less exalted than we do. . . . Everyone isn't as wise as you . . . the natives, for instance?"

The question took Hilda's breath away. She had imagined and prepared for every possible disaster . . . but she had simply forgotten about the natives. George had always seemed, somehow, to take them for granted.

"The natives!" she exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that *they* may give trouble."

"I don't think they value Western civilization so highly that they mightn't give trouble, if they were approached in the right way."

"George knows how to deal with natives," she said proudly—remembering suddenly his stories of the Northwest Frontier, and feeling reassured.

"George knows more about them than any other man in Europe," Livingstone said sincerely, "but which side will he take—Quex's or brother Bunga-Bunga's?"

"What do you mean?" Hilda asked, and stood still, waiting for the answer. The caution of the Roman Governor held no warning for her.

"I only mean," Livingstone answered, "what I said. We shall have to face in Bubuland the eternal question which all Empires face sooner or later. The interest of the natives or the interest on the Empire's money? What's George's answer to that?"

"George is too sensible to worry about questions of that sort. . . . Why suppose the two interests are incompatible?" Hilda looked at him proudly, and struck the flagstone fiercely with her umbrella.

"George will not worry about any other question," Livingstone answered with unusual directness. "But he won't solve it. . . . No one ever does."

"If anyone can," Hilda responded gamely, and with superb logic, "George will."

"Then we shall see the end of this chapter," Livingstone said. And the two walked on in silence to the station. An audience is always restive in the interval.

And George Tracey on the Coronia was looking out to sea.

CHAPTER TEN

THE offices of the Bubuland Syndicate were quietly locked up a week after the expedition had sailed. Quex breathed a sigh of relief.

It was not that the affairs of the expedition had in any way prejudiced his larger interests. Quex's Stores had been landed on to the public now for more than a year, and although the trustful investor had paid the original syndicate three pounds for every one which it had invested, the preference stock at 8 per cent. was not a source of the slightest anxiety. Quite on the contrary, even the ordinary shares issued fully paid to the vendors (in plain English, to Quex and his friends) as part of the purchase price, were themselves earning a handsome dividend, and Quex's personal salary, as chairman, was equally secure. No, Quex's Stores were a going concern in these days, and a quarter of an hour a day was the extent of the attention which it was necessary to give to them "in fairness to the shareholders."

No, it was not for any vulgar business reason that Quex rejoiced at the closing of the little office in Pall Mall. But in the first place he had done six months' work, and he was extremely tired, and in the second place he had spent a very large amount of his own money, an experience absolutely new to him and wearing to a degree.

was to bring the descriptive articles, photographs, interviews, specimens and everything else of the kind back with him with the concessions. Then, and not till then, was Quex to assume the imperial purple and the conqueror's laurels. There would also be an interview or two with Tracey. "That," Quex had said, cutting short Livingstone's protest, "is only fair."

Everything went according to plan, and one fine day the Bubuland Expedition, fit and well except for one anthropologist with a sore heel and one mining engineer with delirium tremens, motored into the narrow streets of the capital city.

It was the time which Tracey had dreaded, for he had always felt just a bit doubtful about the perfectly friendly attitude of the Bubu tribesmen, and he had had a lurking suspicion that the signing of the concessions might not be "just a matter of form, my dear Colonel, just a matter of form." He could still hear Quex, beaming at him over his horn-rimmed spectacles, soothing his soldier's diffidence about complex business transactions, and proclaiming him the born leader of men whom mere business men could only sit and worship from afar. "That old humbug has got something up his sleeve," he had been saying to himself every day for the last six months, and he was expecting that something to hit him in the face just at this psychological moment. Instead he had found that curious creature, Dick Livingstone, the best of fellows, but always a little queer. How like him to turn up here, looking not a day older than when they had last been here together twenty years before, and whispering in his ear as they walked up to the hotel together that

its proximity as entirely unknown as in the noontide of vitality.

And so the beginning of the Bubuland adventure, as the tall ship sailed down Southampton Water, was the absolute end of it for Hilda Altamont. She had dreamed it, but her dream had passed out of her sight. The achievement which was to have been her achievement, the heroisms which were to have sustained her exalted egoism, were, after all, to be something wholly apart from her and wholly belonging to someone else. Perhaps it was inevitable that in the moment of her unwelcome disillusion she should have turned to Quex, waking with unfathomable gratitude from the nightmare of his unwelcome illusions. She could hardly know that Quex was quite so profoundly relieved as he was that those ardent months were passed forever, and that the intrepid explorers had passed with them from his horizon. She could and did know that but for her those months would never have borne fruit, and she thought that Quex must be grateful.

So he was. But hardly in the way she imagined. For he couldn't help seeing how narrow had been his escape, and it was just that which made his gratitude vocal. Had he known any history he might have comforted this strange creature who had come to him for consolation by a quotation: "*L'Empire, c'est la paix.*" The phrase had answered its purpose at the time by reconciling the profound dualism by which every soldier of France is a bourgeois at heart, and every bourgeois holds secret dreams of military glory. It might have reconciled Hilda to his offer of a seat in his office from which to maintain a purely commercial contact

with the Bubuland Corporation, whose rôle it now was to dress the shop window for a public issue of shares in nine months' time.

But Quex had little knowledge of history, and the result was that Hilda accepted his offer without being reconciled in the least to the profound inaction of Empire building as pursued vicariously by the salaried secretary of a highly secret syndicate of close-fisted business men.

"Don't you hate all this waiting?" she asked him once, about two months after the expedition had sailed.

"Waiting for what?" Quex had inquired, scenting trouble.

"Oh, you must know what I mean, Artemas," Hilda said petulantly. "George must be five hundred miles up-country by now, and all we hear is that he's landed safely and that a moldy anthropologist has got malaria and has been left behind at Aden. And I suppose next week we shall get another of those awful dispatches from your journalist friend telling the British public how different the desert is from Hampstead Heath on a bank holiday. But we're doing nothing."

"Doing nothing! I wish I were doing nothing, my dear girl. You don't suppose a company with a million capital can be formed in two days. Don't you see that there are fifty people whose pockets have got to be lined before you can go to the public with a scheme like this? What's going to happen to George Tracey if I sit down now and do nothing?"

"But what *are* you doing? Surely there must be something I can do to help?" Hilda asked despairingly. She could never get used to Quex's uncanny aptitude

for putting her good intentions hopelessly in the wrong.

"Well, if you want to know, I've been spending the last two days at the Colonial Office . . . that's where trouble is coming from, if we're not careful. But that's not the sort of thing that can go down on paper. The politicians, you know, won't scruple to let the Bubuland government lock up your Colonel Tracey and the whole bunch of them unless we have the thing taped out properly."

"But I thought the Government weren't to know anything about it—officially, I mean?"

"The official position, if you want to know, is that the Government have just asked me for information," Quex replied with a smile.

"How exciting!" Hilda Altamont exclaimed, with visions surging in her mind of George Tracey as a national hero—fame in a night—and herself . . . And then she paused for a moment to wonder just where she did come in. "No one is waiting more anxiously for reassuring news of the Tracey expedition than the brave explorer's devoted fiancée." Yes, that was what they were likely to say, and possibly to think, and how utterly wrong it all was. For it wasn't news which she wanted, sitting restlessly in her capacious but eminently virgin office, with her nose turned up and her eyes looking dreamily at the ceiling and her red hair glinting in the sunshine. The Bubuland Expedition had ceased to exist, as far as she was concerned, that sunny morning when she and Dick Livingstone had seen its corporeal embodiment steaming out of sight. It was the daily round of uncommon tasks which she had known for a little—how fortunately, she was too young

to understand—that she wanted to renew. News of the Bubuland Expedition, indeed! No! She wanted to be pulling strings and to see dear old George dancing to order with those unromantic young men from Cambridge suffering extreme discomfort at the call of her imperious imagination. Her exclamation had come from the heart! What a great discovery, that her heart was still beating. And with the discovery, her eyes left the ceiling and rested on the smiling figure of Quex, looking at her over his horn spectacles in a way which was, to say the least of it, hardly Platonic.

In the circumstances you will agree that it was simply inevitable that their eyes should meet; but that the cynical questioning of Quex's omnivorous middle age should have been met with an audaciously challenging assent was more than might have been expected by those less deeply versed in the subtleties of human nature than Dick Livingstone. It was not essentially a surrender. Hilda Altamont, modern to the point of banality in her purely intellectual convictions, was old-fashioned in her belief that love must be passionate. But it was a contingent surrender. The hour would find her ready, and perhaps not for the first time.

To Dick Livingstone, who had come in at the psychological moment—"Life is rather exciting, isn't it?" had been Quex's acknowledgment of this new chapter in the annals of Bubuland—Hilda practically confessed. She was George Tracey's fiancée, and his fiancée she would remain. But her fundamental loyalty, always divided, was now openly given to the man of destiny. In that fateful hour, when she had found Quex's activities exciting, she had understood her mistake. George

Tracey at Tracey Hall, aloof from the noise and smoke and wealth of London, was someone of importance. George Tracey, safely embarked, was not only no more to Quex than to her, but he was nothing to anybody. Just another of the earnest men who live and suffer, and whom the great ones of the earth so benignantly suffer to live—for a brief spell and on conditions. She began to wonder what the conditions were.

In the end, of course, she asked Dick Livingstone.

Dick Livingstone, with all his faults, was the type of whom questions were asked . . . questions, that is, that asked for an answer . . . the particular kind of questions, in short, that one didn't put to Quex. Livingstone was hard put to it, however. He could have told her quite simply that George was the salt of the earth and Quex just a little rather nasty froth on the face of the waters. Spiritually he would have been pretty near to the truth, but he was not asked about spiritual values. He was asked about the world's valuation, and the answer was infernally difficult.

"Put it this way," Hilda persisted, after his more transparent evasions had failed of their purpose. "Why is it that George simply faded out of the picture from the moment he came up to town, while Artemas, who was simply a figure of fun pottering about Sussex in a dusty bowler hat, just took charge of the whole business within five minutes of the office being opened?"

"Well, my first answer would be that he didn't take charge. I took charge." Livingstone laughed.

"Don't you know by now," Hilda answered, "that your first answer is always wrong? Of course Sir Artemas was perfectly useless in the office for all prac-

tical purposes, but the fact remained that he was the chief man. He is now. George is just doing his job, and the scientists are doing theirs, and when the time comes all the railway people and engineers and miners and everyone else will do their job. But it'll be Quex's show then, and no one else's. But for Quex no one would have gone there at all. It's rather great, you know, but I feel just a bit unhappy about George."

Livingstone wasn't laughing any more. She'd seen the whole thing, damn her, and wanted him to get her out of position so that she couldn't see it any more.

"How modern you are, Hilda," was all he could find to say for the moment.

"Of course. . . . Why not?" She was, he fancied, just trying to provoke him into being rather more articulate.

"No," Livingstone shook his head rather sadly, "I'm not trying to tease you. I was being, for once in my life, serious. You are modern. You see things as they are and then try to find a formula to explain them away. The answer to your question, the real answer, is that life is like that. Bad men are usually more useful than good, and clever men less virtuous than foolish men. We others who are neither clever nor foolish, bad nor good, not through our own merit, of course, but simply because we happen to represent a finished type which isn't hurrying off anywhere—our ancestors did all that for us—may provide exceptions in certain ages of history. In Augustan Rome, perhaps, or in Athens, or in Victorian England, or in seventeenth century France—but then the type outlives its usefulness and the law, always general, becomes once

again universal. George Tracey, till he's taxed out of existence, can take charge of things in Sussex; in London he can't. And in Bubuland he won't be asked to. Didn't you realize that when you sent him there? George is miles out of his depth."

"Can't he swim?" Hilda asked, gravely enough.

"Can't a soldier run? You're still looking for the way out, my dear, and it isn't there. 'Show me the path across the gulf of death.' There's a cry from the heart, if you like, but Baring doesn't go on to ask for a Baedeker: he simply says: 'Teach me to pray.' That's the third answer to your question, and I'm afraid it's the only one."

"So George fades out of the picture and the laurels go to Quex . . . Poor old George!" Hilda Altamont was thoughtful for a moment, and then took her woman's refuge in mere anger.

"You might have told George not to go. You're hopeless, you know, as a friend."

"Why on earth shouldn't he go, my dear Hilda?" Livingstone asked blandly—of course he had expected this. "George didn't go for laurels or even thirteen pence a day . . . he went because you asked him. He expects nothing, except perhaps a little loyalty, and I don't know. . . ." Livingstone stopped dead, but it was too late.

"You don't know if he even expects that! You wouldn't know; you're too superior . . . you others . . . you expect nothing and that's why you get nothing."

"There you are again," Livingstone answered, coming up to the scratch briskly enough. "That's twen-

tieth century culture all over. Has it never occurred to you that the horse goes better in front of the cart? I get nothing, and that's why I stop expecting anything. That's God's common sense. Your version is mere brummagem intellectuality. Ever heard of Gethsemane?"

"Gethsemane . . . what's that got to do with us? Don't let's get on to religion, Dick, for we shan't agree."

Dick Livingstone shrugged his shoulders. It was all a little hopeless, he felt, to try to get this eminently attractive girl, who was in love with one man and engaged to another, to see that there was no way out. Boys and girls of this rather ridiculous post-war generation didn't seem to care for that story which Anatole France loved so well that he told it over and over again. "Men are born, they suffer and they die." There was the answer to the riddle of Gethsemane; but no one wanted the answer, it seemed. At least, they didn't want that answer. And so, instead of giving it, he asked Hilda Altamont to go to Ranelagh on Sunday. But she was going to Roehampton with Quex.

"Then why come to me with your riddles?" he asked her good-naturedly enough.

"Well, I can't ask Quex, can I? Besides, you've answered my question."

"What was your question?" Livingstone asked, as he turned to the door, but he didn't wait for the answer.

What happened on that Sunday at Roehampton Livingstone never discovered, for as it happened he

was sent off by Quex to Bubuland to look after the interests of the expedition at Ibbas-Ibba, where the venerable Bubu Emperor held his court. Livingstone was, of course, the man for the job. The intrigues of an African native court are peculiar rather than subtle, and all he had to do was to go shooting with the staffs of the different legations and distribute highly conditional promises of reward to the Emperor's favorites whom he called his ministers and the Emperor's mistresses whom he called his wives. As soon as George Tracey had got through from the interior and had negotiated his concessions, Livingstone was to come home, and report on the situation.

This is not the story of the Bubuland Expedition. For us, as for Hilda Altamont, it ceased to have objective existence when it left its native shore, and the hardships and adventures of its five months' trek in the wilderness must be read where Quex intended them to be read, in the contemporary files of the Times. Not a word came out of the desert till Livingstone had been at Ibbas-Ibba for three months. A discreet wireless message or two, severely censored by Tracey, who had his own doubts as to the perfectly friendly attitude of the natives and who was careful to give the location always of a week or so ago, came through to Livingstone at the capital and to Quex in London. Naturally enough, even these messages were coded, but Quex had insisted that nothing should come through which couldn't be published, and published it was, in the most matter-of-fact way and without comment of any kind. This in other words was mere news. The publicity was to come later. Livingstone

was to bring the descriptive articles, photographs, interviews, specimens and everything else of the kind back with him with the concessions. Then, and not till then, was Quex to assume the imperial purple and the conqueror's laurels. There would also be an interview or two with Tracey. "That," Quex had said, cutting short Livingstone's protest, "is only fair."

Everything went according to plan, and one fine day the Bubuland Expedition, fit and well except for one anthropologist with a sore heel and one mining engineer with delirium tremens, motored into the narrow streets of the capital city.

It was the time which Tracey had dreaded, for he had always felt just a bit doubtful about the perfectly friendly attitude of the Bubu tribesmen, and he had had a lurking suspicion that the signing of the concessions might not be "just a matter of form, my dear Colonel, just a matter of form." He could still hear Quex, beaming at him over his horn-rimmed spectacles, soothing his soldier's diffidence about complex business transactions, and proclaiming him the born leader of men whom mere business men could only sit and worship from afar. "That old humbug has got something up his sleeve," he had been saying to himself every day for the last six months, and he was expecting that something to hit him in the face just at this psychological moment. Instead he had found that curious creature, Dick Livingstone, the best of fellows, but always a little queer. How like him to turn up here, looking not a day older than when they had last been here together twenty years before, and whispering in his ear as they walked up to the hotel together that

there was time for one before dinner! And how reassuringly English! George sat down at the bar and looked his friend up and down.

"How's Hilda?"

"Looking fine, George," Livingstone answered. He seemed to spend his life answering questions which—well—needed a good bit of tact in that line. "I've got five letters here for you—all from her, I suspect."

He took them out of his pocket and put them down on the bar counter, and George took them up and put them in his own pocket. What a relief to meet one of one's own sort again, Livingstone felt, and his thankfulness was none the less profound because he didn't know yet what Quex had said to Hilda at Roehampton on that Sunday afternoon nearly five months ago.

"And how's your extraordinary cousin?" Tracey asked after another pause, partly taken up by the buying of another drink. If George Tracey had arrived in the moon by some mischance he could still be trusted to have the right currency in that worn-out old pocket-book which had bought drinks and bribed natives and bought other things as well in every storm center of the world for thirty years.

"Quex!" Livingstone exclaimed. "Oh, the great Quex is just the same. I suppose he's going to make another million or two out of this?" he added, lowering his voice.

"God's own country, Dick, if it weren't for the inhabitants," Tracey answered enigmatically. "Tell you more about that later."

And then the scientists and engineers—the whole bunch, in fact—began to come in, and Livingstone was busy buying drinks and shaking hands for an hour or so.

Naturally he got the first real information from the youngest of the scientists, who was ready to talk for any length of time about his adventures, but Tracey, who had clearly got a very good grip on his miscellaneous crew, shut him up after five minutes or so. And it was just as well, as it hadn't occurred to this young man who knew so much about the past and the future —he was a biologist—that the present at any rate held a few secrets which couldn't be acquired in three years at Cambridge.

It was after eleven in the evening, and in Tracey's bedroom at that, before Dick Livingstone got any serious information. When it came, it was certainly worth waiting for.

"When someone has spent a cool million knocking sense into the heads of these dagoes, someone'll make his fortune out of this blessed country."

That was George Tracey's first summing up, given after half a dozen whiskies, in response to Livingstone's equally enigmatic query: "And the answer's a lemon?" Livingstone had pitched his question in a low key, for he wanted for this moment none of George's infectious pessimism. Some ass on the staff had once described Tracey to him as "a magnetic personality," and he had earned a certain reputation as a time-server by his acrid comment that he was "charged with a highly negative magnetism." The comment,

however, despite its wit, was tolerably accurate. To get a fair account of anything from George, you had to show pretty plainly that you expected nothing.

The expedition, apparently, had had a rough but interesting time of it. Geographically speaking, the answer was not so much a lemon as a peach. Secrets which Stanley and Livingstone had never penetrated had fallen before Quex. Men who had spent a lifetime in the hinterland of Sudan or trekked westward from Somaliland in search of honest adventure had never covered quite the ground of Quex's arduous adventure, or earned half the praise for a lifetime of pioneering which Quex would now get, if his publicity man was up to specification.

"It's the devil's own work though, Dick, exploring with a bunch of parasitic duds at your heels," Tracey had said rather wearily after giving a brief account of their adventures. "The Cambridge boys were all right when it came to hard manual labor, but as for taking care of themselves or thinking about anything on God's earth—give me a section of the old army any day in exchange. Talk about education, those lads couldn't keep themselves alive outside a boarding-house, and even then I expect they only get on with it by running up bills which their maiden aunts have to pay."

Livingstone smiled. It was so like old George to prefer a handful of old soldiers to this galaxy of brilliant talent brought together by Hilda Altamont's enthusiasm for the canonization of Quex's ambitions. Nothing ever deceived George—he remembered the trait now—not even appearances.

"What about the others—Quex's men?" Livingstone asked after a pause.

Tracey burst out laughing. "Quex's men! As big a set of hard-drinking scoundrels as you could want: splendid fellows under discipline, but I was glad of my revolver. The sight of their faces when I set them down to work under my supervision was something like hell at closing time."

Livingstone was anxious to find out just how Tracey had set them to work, and what the results had been, but he was content to let him wander on in his own way. Livingstone got the impression that Tracey had fairly staggered the whole personnel of the expedition —not excluding the scientists—by taking charge of the whole show from the day they landed. They seemed to have expected a few weeks' hard drinking at Aden, and a little surveying up-country later on, with the onus on everyone of doing his job as well or as badly as he thought fit. Tracey's idea had been different, and he'd taken them for a trip of nearly 3,000 miles in just under 100 days, mostly in unknown country, with no roads and precious little water.

The scientists had got used to it in the end, Tracey had to admit, and one or two of them even became quite decent shots, but it had been infernally difficult at first to get them to realize that their time was not their own; that, in plain English, their first job was to keep themselves fit, well and on the move, and only their second job "to mess about with their hobbies." Tracey's story of the anthropologist who told his "boy" in the best Oxford accent to call him at half past eight every morning and bring his breakfast at ten was per-

haps not wholly credible, but it had a measure of artistic truth. It crystallized conveniently enough the mental attitude of the anthropologist confronted in the wilds of Africa with the realities of primitive existence. He just didn't know where he was. He couldn't even differentiate the longing for middle-class comforts from the imperious call to win from reluctant Nature the right simply and cleanly to live.

Quex's experts, as Livingstone had always suspected, were a very different proposition. Equally at home in a Birmingham bar and in the bush, they gave no trouble except when required to place their professional skill in unrestricted measure at the service of a retired colonel who had not even crossed the rubicon which separates Pall Mall from the City. But they had met their master. Tracey was quietly emphatic on that point, and hinted that Quex's draft report would need a very drastic measure of alteration.

"That's just what we wanted to know, George," Livingstone interrupted at this point. "Did you actually find any trace of any of those gold fields, for instance?"

"Gold! Good Lord, yes," Tracey said without hesitation, "but not by any means where we were told to look for it. These beggars had got on to any number of disused workings—some of them, according to one tame geologist, centuries old—and had bribed a native or two to arrange everything for our visit. Nothing doing, however. I arranged the conditions of the tests and then set the geologist bloke to see what really was to be found."

"Set a thief to catch a thief," Livingstone commented cynically.

"More or less," Tracey laughed. "Anyway, the result was excellent. We found one stretch of the river with alluvial gold in workable quantities, and two areas promising really good results from mining operations on a big scale. Mind you, the experts weren't far out. Only four miles in one case and ten in the other."

"Native tradition, I suppose?" Livingstone queried.

"Obviously," Tracey answered. "Unverified reports certified on second-hand evidence after one visit carefully arranged with everything ready . . . a mug's game."

"What does brother Bubu get out of it, though?" Livingstone asked, rather puzzled. "They don't go in for mining royalties in this part of the world, I take it?"

"You've hit it, Dick," Tracey said, becoming serious for the first time. "This isn't a white man's country —not yet, at any rate. There's something on foot, and I don't know what it is. What that young pup, Jenkinson"—Jenkinson was the biologist—"was saying in the bar is perfectly true. The tribes up-country would have cut our throats for sixpence at least twice if we hadn't put up a pretty cool bluff. And you must remember that they're not savages . . . their civilization dates back about 1,000 years before ours and incidentally, unlike ourselves, they're Christians. It's some political game, I gather. . . . What's behind all this, Dick? Is it a square deal, or what the hell *is* Quex's game?"

Livingstone couldn't help wondering for the thousandth time at Quex's uncanny instinct in sending him out to meet Tracey. As usual, it would be he himself who would have to see the thing through, if it was to go through at all. And when he got through, Quex would go all over London talking of "my concessions," and throwing out broad hints of the difficulties he had had to meet owing to the congenital idiocy of all his associates.

And the situation was actually worse than he had feared. For the concessions were, in fact, solely his to give or withhold, and the decision . . . well, of course, he knew already what the decision had to be. He had been sent out here at Quex's expense, he was drawing Quex's salary, he was representing Quex's interests. But for all his cynicism, and all his eminently logical morality, he knew in the back of his consciousness that the path to heaven is not flagged out with syllogisms. He would use all his consummate tact, his knowledge of the world of courts and diplomats and "agents" and "interests" which was his birthright, and he would go back to London with a lien on the resources of half an Empire in his pocket, and he would have no more feeling of pleasure or even complacency about it than if he had picked out of somebody's pocket ten thousand in bank notes and was going home to spend it, as Quex would say, "up west."

Of course, the whole trouble was that he had had to answer George Tracey's very plain question in the most reassuring manner possible. In actual fact he knew nothing of any political intrigue, and as regards the squareness of the deal, if the Emperor chose to give

Quex the concessions and Quex chose to pay for them . . . well, the deal was as square as any deal ever was in a world where buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest is the whole duty, if not of common men, at least of knights, baronets and peers. Even if he had known that, at this very moment when he was giving his blunt and soldierly assurances to his old friend, the Colonial Office telegram drafted long ago by the Soulle of honor was lying at the British Legation four doors up the street, his answer would have been the same. What could have been, indeed, more reassuring to poor George Tracey, fearful as any retired colonel in a boarding-house of the very name of politician, than Lord Soulle's personal assurance to the Bubuland Government that "His Majesty's Government think it only right to disclaim . . ."

Of course, it would still remain for decision in London whether the concessions would be taken up. The final decision on the point rested with Quex and any influence he himself had got could then be used "in the right way."

"That's all very well, Dick," Tracey had interrupted when Livingstone made this particular point in his plea of reassurance, "but what is 'the right way'?"

"God knows, George," Livingstone had replied truthfully, but added, with less accuracy, that he himself didn't.

The real crux of the problem was the indefinite hostility of the native population in the southern and eastern territory of Bubuland where the concessions were situated. In Bubua itself the atmosphere was quite extraordinarily friendly, and for the last four hundred

miles of their journey, according to Tracey, it had been the same. The view of the Legation was that it was just a question of getting the outlying tribes accustomed to the ways of Britishers. It was a facile doctrine, more palatable to George Tracey's simple faith and Norman blood than to Livingstone's more inquiring mind. Yet even Livingstone had to admit, and even to himself, that the idea of Quex being in league with some mysterious Prester John of the Bubu hinterland was merely ridiculous. The idea of Quex negotiating a deal with any such romantic personality, each sentence beginning with his one and only diplomatic formula, "You and I, my dear sir, with our larger way of looking at things," was really sublimely ridiculous. If Quex had military ambitions they were surely, he felt, centered in the contracts branch of the War Office.

When it came to the point, it was really with little more than a vague feeling of disloyalty to some quite indefinable tradition that Livingstone set his signature to the concessions. And perhaps, after all, he was right in thinking that, as a business man, he had had no alternative. "As a business man!" Yes. That was just the trouble. A smaller man bred in the same tradition would have shirked the responsibilities of that not very enigmatical position. Would a larger man have overridden them? That was the secret doubt which hurt. The only balm to Livingstone's injured vanity was that Tracey by some curious kink didn't seem to see his difficulties at all. He seemed to take it for granted that he would sign. But then George Tracey was like that. So straightforward. . . . And

Dick Livingstone turned his back on him, and on Bubua, with the feeling that men of that particular stamp were strangely few in the place for which he was bound. For on landing at Plymouth he went straight to the City.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WITH the return of Dick Livingstone and the concessions the atmosphere of Quex's offices became charged once more with that peculiar form of electricity which galvanizes limited liability companies into life.

It would be profoundly unscientific to mistake electricity for gas. Electricity may be equally deadly when directed against the unwary, but it does not act as an intoxicant, or even a soporific. On the contrary, it begins by stimulating, grows rapidly startling, and ends by throwing the victim into a fever of self-induced expectation.

There are other differences which, for the benefit of the scattered survivors of the age of liberal education, should be elucidated. Gas can be turned on from a tap. It issues in a cloud, and unless some onlooker applies a match and causes an explosion it diffuses itself gradually and evenly. Electricity is a different article altogether. Complicated systems of switches and wires and dynamos and insulators are necessary before its stupendous force can be exercised, and even then it must be exercised against a prearranged objective carefully selected and brought into touch with the generating station by highly artificial measures.

Far be it from a humble chronicler to intervene in

the highly technical controversy between two great industries. The art of company-promoting by gas has had even in the most recent times at least one assiduous exponent, and the story of earlier days brings to mind such great figures as Whitaker Wright and his associates. But Quex belonged, without question, to the opposite camp. He believed the gas method to be, to use his own words, "fundamentally unsound." "My dear Corrian," he used to say, time and again, when that hardened old sinner was urging him to develop his publicity organization and advertise for money in cash instead of advertising for customers, "we don't want thousands of widows and orphans and country parsons attending our meetings. Just suppose for a moment that something went wrong, we should have a swarm of solicitors' letters! Anything might happen."

Quex's idea of the game was altogether different. Big money, and big influences behind the money to make the money safe in the end, even if it wasn't in the beginning . . . such was his conception. And to translate it into action meant the most careful and intricate manipulation. It was necessary to create an atmosphere—not a soporific atmosphere, but one of expectancy. To set men here and there working hard at overreaching their fellows . . . to set rumor afoot, and to flood the political clubs with gossip . . . to throw over every transaction the shadow of a big name —*magni nominis umbram.* Finally, at the psychological moment, Quex would press the button and set this politician, this journalist, and that financier busily at work for Quex's ends. They meet, they confer, and confidence is established! "The creation of prestige!"

That was Quex's seventeenth gospel, and he was a highly skilful apostle.

It was a gospel which was stimulating not to Quex alone. Hilda Altamont shared in every titillatory excitement of those hectic weeks. She, a woman, was making history. . . . How splendidly post-war! She was making George Tracey famous. . . . What Victorian loyalty! She was working for Quex. . . . What Georgian infidelity! She was enjoying herself. . . . How aristocratic! To be a feminist, a love-lorn maiden, a meditator of infidelities, a conscious hedonist. . . . What a career! Poor Hilda Altamont! living in Surbiton amid the shades of the '90's. Of a truth, the evil that men do lives after them—in the suburbs.

The original syndicate were, of course, the first to be mobilized in the interests of the subterranean publicity campaign. They had agreed long ago among themselves that the initial outlay was to be recompensed by ordinary shares. It was unwise, so Quex argued, to go to the public on terms which meant that the original syndicate recovered immediately what they had risked. Their object was all the more intensely to arouse public interest, so that the public's adventurous ardor in the matter of investment in the preference shares should be such as to turn their own ordinary shares into cash at the earliest possible moment. Of course, methods employed differed. Sir James Robinson (honest Jim Robinson, as he was now generally called) went north, and rumors circulated in his track with amazing vitality. If Jim Robinson had put money on it, it was a certainty, was the prevailing view in Bradford.

"A New 'Rand' in North Africa?" was the heading to a note circulated to the financial press by a discreet publicity agent whose activities were confined in the best modern style to the editorial columns.

Lord Soulle, in a speech at Bradford on the Government's unemployment policy, devoted a whole five minutes to the Trade Facilities Scheme, which might—who could say?—be the means of "lighting up even the darkest portions of the dark continent by the life-giving rays of British commercial enterprise." A Government journalist had once described Lord Soulle as a natural orator. This sort of thing was the inevitable result.

A governor of the Bank of Scotland saw fit only a few days later to echo Lord Soulle's inspired vision—in the course of a survey which drew a pathetic picture of the vanished markets of Central and Eastern Europe. An eminent Opposition leader with big interests in Yorkshire (another natural orator) illuminated a review of the textile position by urging the development of new markets among those native races who "are just now waking from the slumber of centuries and asking avidly for at least a few crumbs from the well-laden tables of Western civilization."

Quex merely said, "Watch Bubuland," but he said it in a very peculiar way which set people watching. Hilda Altamont said nothing. She was not allowed to say anything, but she dropped confidential hints to her uncle of a new Eldorado which somehow reached everyone in Throgmorton Street within the day.

Last but not least, the scientists were home *en masse,* and were talking without ceasing about everything in

Bubuland, except the gold, the copper and the cattle. They would have talked about these also, but they felt it safer, being specialists, to talk about things which no one else knew anything about. This was, as a matter of fact, just exactly what Quex wanted. Once let it be rumored that Bubuland was a land of mystery and romance and "the trick," as Lord Soulle put it, "was done to a turn."

Lord Soulle had been, of course, the starting-point of all their activities. Quex had indeed found so little difficulty in tying down the Soulle of honor to an active cooperation, that he always described the successful launching of the Bubuland Corporation as a "twentieth century miracle." It was a happy phrase. The position of the Government, long since precarious, had grown almost desperate during the last ten months.

To be just, this unfortunate state of affairs was not due in any way to Lord Soulle's administration of his department. It took more than that nobleman's breezy malevolence to disturb the deep-seated complacency which holds together English-speaking peoples and their Colonies in a loose confederacy of moral superiority. The Empire was still sound at heart. But the same could not be said, alas! for the United Kingdom.

The painful episode of the Turkish peace had left a nasty taste in the mouth of the electorate, and a still nastier feeling in the pit of the Prime Minister's stomach. If it was not possible to stage even a second-class war in the name of Christianity, then the British public was not what it was. Never before in our history had sonorous eloquence, directed against infidel oppressors of Christians rightly struggling to be free, fallen so

appallingly flat. As the Premier himself put it in one of his intimate moments, "This cock wouldn't fight." And if rhetoric even of his exalted standard was to fail, what was left as a basis for the reconstruction of the Empire and the inauguration of a new era of national prosperity?

The first answer, as it had revealed itself to the Prime Minister in a flash of inspiration, was "wire-pulling." If the appeal to principles and the brandishing of battle-axes were of no avail in the fight for office and the leadership of humanity, cunning and conferences were, it was obvious, highly promising alternatives. And in a spirit of at any rate ardent disillusion the great statesman had put back his hand to the plow. Conference had followed conference on every political battleground. Secret memoranda, awards, protocols, agreements, understandings, gentlemen's agreements, letters and even telegrams, littered the council rooms of Europe, the desks of captains of industry, the offices of trades unions. In the same descending scale reports had issued with feverish and almost transportive profusion from Commissions, Parliamentary Committees, Committees of Inquiry, departmental Committees and the secretaries of no less than seventeen different inter-Allied advisory bodies, all of them joining in the desperate battle for the continuance of office and the privilege of making clear to posterity the precise identity of victory and defeat among democratic peoples educated to the requisite pitch of pious disillusion.

Alas that it should be necessary to record, in the mere interest of historical accuracy, that the result

of these stupendous machinations was mere disaster. Civil and religious wars flourished with terrible disregard to the Prime Minister's perorations. The French, with their silly logic, refused to accept a protocol instead of bread, and the Germans to recognize in an armed occupation and crushing reparations a peace without annexations or indemnities. Even the British working man—by far the noblest Roman of them all—hesitated to accept the Bureau of Reconstruction as a substitute for regular work, good wages and decent houses.

The electroplated fist and the velveteen glove had both failed. That was the plain truth. Something had had to be done. It was in these cruel circumstances that the volatile Prime Minister had begun, through the mouths of his agents in the press and on the platform, to change the location of his heroes' homes from Great Britain to the less-known hinterland of our Imperial possessions.

Lord Soulle, as Colonial Secretary, was naturally deeply involved in the working out of this new policy. It would not be fair to a famous company director to suggest that he had any serious belief in it. It was only a palliative, and a very tiny palliative at that. Moreover, it was obvious that where there was justification for any substantial capital expenditure, the capital would be forthcoming in any case; his advisers found it unnecessary to stress this point, for they were dealing with a man who knew all about the law of human avarice, though he termed it, whimsically enough, the law of supply and demand, a phrase which

was new to some of the older permanent officials. But Lord Soulle, for all his shrewd doubts, was loyal to his chief. He was going to do his best with the new policy. His best had been to ring up Quex on the telephone.

This was a miracle. For the telephone bell had rung precisely twenty-four hours after Dick Livingstone's return.

It was not, of course, on the claimed ground of national interest that the eminent statesman had approached the embryo Empire builder. Soulle knew his Quex, and knew that the national interest was not, speaking quite frankly, the ideal line of approach. Moreover, he himself would have been exceptionally hard put to it to convey the requisite degree of confidence in the association of the P.M.'s dynamic and volatile personality with the gentle art of cultivating our garden. If such indeed was the hour, the P.M., Soulle felt, was hardly the man. Soulle's first remark to Quex—"The time has come, my dear Quex, to make a little hay"—was thus not merely a sagacious political forecast, and a cry from the heart, but a supremely apt and diplomatic formula.

"You're not suggesting," Quex had said, brandishing his pince-nez with as statesmanlike an air as he could assume, "that it would be possible for your department, for instance, to interest themselves at all officially?"

"Good God, no!" Soulle replied instantly. "My people wouldn't hear of it. Besides, it would be fatal to us."

"To us?" Quex asked blandly.

"To us, yes," Lord Soulle echoed with a peculiar shade of definiteness in his usually soothing voice.

Quex sat back in his chair and twiddled his thumbs for a minute or two. He was not by any means clear what the game was, but it was clear as daylight that Soulle was out to earn his hypothetical £10,000 a year; and that was a thing to which he never objected. It was only when it came to paying the money after the earning was over that his business instincts made him cautious.

"How much do you want?" Soulle asked, interrupting his reverie.

"A million," Quex replied, with businesslike precision. Then there was another pause, while the Soulle of honor helped himself to another glass of Quex's pre-war whisky.

"What about Trade Facilities?" Soulle asked suddenly, and then a broad smile came over his rather rubicund countenance, and he gave a barely perceptible wink. Barely perceptible, but perceived.

"Your nephew, of course, would be ready to join the board of the new company?" Quex asked without a moment's hesitation, and Soulle nodded.

Quex had intended to raise a thousand other points, but the new turn given to the negotiations silenced him. He had been quite ready to go ahead with a really firm assurance that no obstacle would be placed in the way of the ratification of the concessions, despite any protests which might come in from Italy and France. Indeed, his object all through had been confined to getting this assurance. The more precarious the posi-

tion of the Government, the less value the assurance possessed, of course, but on the other hand, the easier it was to extract it; and Quex had been prepared to take a chance on what the next Government might do. Soulle, however, was evidently of a less trusting disposition, and his suggestion, in favor of which he would obviously exercise his influence on terms, for a loan under the Trade Facilities Act, was a brilliant method of safeguarding the interests of the company when a new Government came into office.

Of course, Soulle couldn't know how Quex meant to bring about the annexation of Southern Bubuland, but there was little doubt that he had seen the possibility of trouble and was ready, "as long, of course, as the requirements of the regulations under the Trade Facilities Act as laid down by the Treasury are fulfilled in every detail" (Soulle had been most emphatic on this point), to get the new company such a measure of recognition (by another department) as would make it at least a two to one chance that any decent government would support them later if anyone in Bubuland gave any trouble.

The hint dropped by Soulle had been enough. Quex hadn't gone near the Colonial Office or even seen Soulle outside it from that evening till the day of his successful flotation. He had got from the Treasury finally £250,000 out of the £500,000 which was wanted ultimately, and £125,000 out of the quarter of a million for which he was asking immediately. This amount was for the construction of the railway to the border of Southern Bubuland, for the provision of rolling stock and locomotives for the whole line, and

for the provision of mining machinery and appliances. The balance of the capital required immediately was for taking up the options on the concessions, for the extension of the railway into Bubuland, for the preliminary stocking and equipping of the ranches, with a balance for working capital.

Seeing that no return could possibly be looked for for two or three years, the venture was on the speculative side; but the names of Quex, the Right Hon. Jocelyn Soulle, C.B.E., and Sir James Robinson, K.B.E., all men whom the King had delighted to honor and, therefore, all honorable men, added to the fact that the venture had, quite obviously, the enthusiastic support of the Government itself, set the doubts even of cynics at rest. The Times, indeed, talked a little crudely about "people having money to burn," and no doubt dissuaded a few widows and orphans from investing their whole fortunes in the venture. As regards the majority, however, "the adventuring spirit," as Quex told a Daily Mail interviewer (on the afternoon when the subscription list was closed, four times oversubscribed), "is clearly still alive. And thank God for it." Thus warming up to his task he went on to say that in his view "the response to the first public issue of the Bubuland Corporation was, at the very least, as truly gallant and as truly British as Drake's gesture at Cadiz Bay or Roger Keyes's heroic adventure at Zeebrugge."

The same afternoon he had a long conference with his broker discussing the best method of unloading, with due discretion—"necessary," as he well put it, "in all the circumstances"—a proportion of the hun-

dred thousand (one shilling) ordinary shares which were his immediate reward for his personal share in launching this band of heroes on the road to fortune.

Quex did not doubt for a moment that the shares would eventually be worth a hundred times their nominal value. And, as we all know, Quex was perfectly right in his judgment. But it was a matter of principle with him not to speculate with his own money except in moments of great emotional tension and under feminine influences quite irresistible. He had put a lot of his own money into the exploration syndicate, and it was a matter not of inclination but of duty to get it back at the earliest possible moment, with a reasonable profit.

Luckily for him, the excitement over the new flotation lasted a considerable time, and the enthusiastic view taken by the attenuated Government press was shared for once by a number of the independent papers. A hundred thousand ordinary shares had, moreover, been offered for public subscription and these, too, had been oversubscribed and soon rose to nearly six shillings a share, so that dealings in the ordinary shares judiciously carried out through a number of channels attracted no particular notice. The position was substantially helped by the brilliantly written account of the original expedition which was still being serialized in the Bulletin, and which, though written by no less outspoken and reliable a journalist than Sir Francis Fisher-Francis, gave evidence of saying much less than might be said of the immense natural wealth of the country through which the expedition had passed.

The long and the short of it was that Quex found

himself, two months after the Bubuland Corporation had come into official existence, managing director of a vast concern in which he held seventy thousand ordinary shares for which he had not paid a penny, with seven or eight thousand in his pocket as a small cash solatium for his arduous labor, and with a lavish salary to help him to meet those "very grave responsibilities which men in my position have to face."

This phrase had become one of Quex's favorites, to Livingstone's intense annoyance, an annoyance which had not been modified to any extent by Quex's attempt to do him out of the secretaryship of the new company. The fact was that his cousin's preposterous assumption of something like equality was becoming irksome to Quex. Livingstone had been abundantly useful to him in the pre-war world when a tame gentleman was a distinct commercial asset, especially in dealing with retail tradesmen. In the new world, Livingstone impressed no one. Quex found that his business associates resented his cousin's pretense of being at his ease with rich men, and they were frankly disgusted by his voice and his habit of quoting Latin. Besides, there was the problem of Hilda Altamont. Of course, she would be useless as a company secretary, but as a personal secretary she possessed all the essential qualifications. And he wasn't going to have "that infernal fellow" messing round with his talk about loyalty, and his continual chatter about George and the wedding; as if George Tracey hadn't got quite enough to do now in Bubuland without interfering with Quex's own arrangements.

Unfortunately, there was one factor which Quex

had ignored, and that was that Livingstone had no intention whatever of being swindled. Quex had opened the matter in a state of triumphant optimism.

"You know, Dick," he said, "my one regret about this Bubuland business is that these daily talks of ours will become very rare happenings when you're tied here looking after the nation's health, and I'm over at the new offices trying to make these damned niggers do an honest day's work."

But Livingstone had been ready for him.

"Oh, no! Quex," he had replied with a disarming suavity, "I can do secretary to the two companies without overstrain, and, to be quite frank, I mean to do it. I couldn't get George into a show like this and then back out myself. You'd have his resignation in your pocket in the time it takes to send a wire from Ibbas."

"My dear Dick"—Quex always fought a losing battle gallantly—"I don't like all this talk about loyalty." Quex rolled the word round his tongue with the air of a hero facing an unpalatable reality with determination. "We're all 'loyal,' I hope, but we're business men responsible to the public for a lot of money, and I know you'll agree with me that any merely personal consideration . . ." Quex paused. It amused him to appeal to his cousin's finer feelings and to see him wriggling. But this time there was no wriggle at all, for Livingstone for once held a trump card.

"It's no good, Quex," was all he said. "It's both of us or neither. If I go, George goes, and that's flat."

"Well, well," Quex resigned himself with an uneasy magnanimity, "if you put it like that, I must give way.

But I think you're wrong. In a year you'd be running this business if you concentrated on it, and you could name your own figure."

"I'm always able to do that," Livingstone said genially enough. He was always slightly ashamed of any victory over his cousin, because it hurt his vanity to have to fight.

But Dick Livingstone, for all his affectations, was enough of a soldier to hold his ground. He meant to see this thing through, and to see George Tracey safely married and back in England before he gave up. It had become a point of honor with him, a solatium to his conscience, which rested always uneasily in the neighborhood of Quex. He still felt that there was everything superficially in favor of Bubuland as a venture, and he knew the country well enough to know that in the long run also the venture was commercially sound. It was the intermediate stage which worried a brain which fed avidly on subtle doubts, and had grown by long practice sensitive to their implications.

Hilda gave him no help. He had really insisted on the secretaryship of the new company in order to be near her. He knew Quex wanted her, but he hoped, and to some extent believed, that Hilda, utterly disillusioned as she was about the romance of vicarious Empire building, would merely flirt busily and reserve herself with irritable pride for her now almost legendary fiancé. In any case, her morals were her own affair—but not so her mind. She seemed so hardened to the intrigues of Quex's company promoting, so indifferent to the work which George was actually going to do, that he saw her sanctioning by her mere presence

in the office the most impossible undertakings. "It is all so exciting." How he dreaded that terrible post-war chorus of approbation with which she greeted every ingenious little swindle of Quex's fertile brain. What if some big swindle, involving George as a silent accomplice, should be "too frightfully thrilling" for her to resist? Of course, George would let her down, but he would let himself down too, and the world is hard on people who resign in a crisis.

But after a month or so these doubts began to fade. The business seemed almost uncannily straight, and Hilda, thinly disguised as a secretary to Quex, began to find it dull. This was to Livingstone infinitely reassuring. He actually asked her one day whether she still liked Empire building, and she tossed her head in the air with her still girlish impudence and said: "I'd almost as soon be married."

"Is that saying a lot?" Livingstone asked; but Hilda Altamont just flushed a little. Which was she thinking of, Livingstone wondered, and wrote that night to Tracey to find out when he was coming back on leave.

He asked again a little later, at one of their periodical lunches, how she was looking forward to being mistress of Tracey Hall. She tried to laugh it off, but he insisted on an answer.

"It'll be rather dull after all this," she said, just a little frightened.

"You've been reading some of our modern novelists with the country-house complex," Livingstone said with the best intentions, but oddly enough she hadn't. She just wished Tracey were a little more like Quex.

"My dear girl, George is worth a hundred of Quex," Livingstone said, unconsciously apologetic.

"But I don't want to marry him. I want him to marry me," was her answer, quick as his repentance of his own priggishness.

"I wonder if George will be any different when the time comes?" she added after a pause.

"Doesn't that depend rather on you?" Livingstone asked, without, however, any very great conviction. He knew well enough that, as a matter of fact, marriage was nothing more or less than an incident to a man of Tracey's caste. Egoism is only a revolt against an inferior status or an unattractive environment . . . the vice of the submerged . . . the vanity of the humble. People like George Tracey had something better to express than themselves. They had history, tradition, breeding, prejudice if you will. And their love affairs might possibly form an adventure, but hardly ever a romance.

Livingstone tried hard to explain a little of this to Hilda, but found it almost hopeless. The gulf between the intelligentsia of Surbiton and the old aristocracy was too vast to bridge even over Crimean brandy. An agricultural laborer might have understood, and a yeoman farmer certainly would have, but Hilda Altamont was miles out of reach.

It wasn't that Tracey was going to keep his very charming bride shut up at his place in the country entertaining dullards and breeding heirs to the estate. He wasn't that type of man, if indeed the type exists outside the imagination of novelists. It was simply that George was not going to change his character, his

views, or his occupations, when he married, and it was idiotic to pretend that he was, and infernally hard to break it to Hilda that he wasn't. Her only hope was to sweep him off his feet. As a "stunt," George Tracey would do anything.

"Do you mean," Hilda had asked characteristically, "that I've got to take charge and make him do what I want?"

"Good God, no! On the contrary, swallow your pride and realize once and for all that you and he have both got wills of your own, and ideas of your own, and that George will do everything in the world for you, except take you seriously. You're not the heroine of a novel, you see."

That was just the trouble, of course. She had thought of herself as the heroine of a particularly fine and exciting novel, and as Bubuland grew duller and duller, the novel was becoming, in her inmost consciousness, more and more exciting. She had yet to learn that it is only the incidents of life which are exciting.

This much, as a matter of fact, Livingstone did tell her, in so many words. And for once, the idea seemed to sink in. But hardly the moral, for her answer was that she must clearly see to it that her life "was a succession of incidents."

I find Hilda Altamont intruding more and more into these notes of Quex's career, and without very much excuse. Of course she interested Quex, and of course he made love to her. It was his only conversational approach to charming young women and experience brought him few rebuffs. But she was in no sense at

this time a dominant force in his life. But for her bright eyes and radiant smile the Bubuland Corporation might never have come into being, but, once it was formed, the business side of the enterprise gripped him, and the opening moves in the game passed from his memory as easily as the heated arguments with auditors which usually presaged the issue of Quex's prospectuses. It was all part of the game, but one could only lie once and trust to luck for the result. Quex, indeed, was gifted to a preeminent degree with the business man's infinite capacity for taking profits without taking pains.

"My company, my profits," was his motto. He would have shouldered the losses in the same way, so he said, and the fact that the losses never materialized while the profits rolled in year by year, did not suggest any flaw in his argument.

So Hilda Altamont had become for Quex merely a preeminently attractive piece of office furniture, who provided him with a convenient excuse now and then for a lunch at the Ritz, a dinner at the Carlton, or a supper in a private room at Floriano's. It was only when it was suddenly brought home to him that Hilda might be a fitting but was not a fixture, that he became suddenly angry. And his anger, of course, was directed against "that infernal fellow," his cousin, who had obviously incited George Tracey to his "discreditable move." The "discreditable move" was Tracey's request to return to England on a month's leave to marry his fiancée.

With this proposal the sands were running out.

As Quex, who had lent his new flat in Park Lane for

the reception, saw George Tracey and Hilda drive off to the station on their way to Tracey Hall for the first week of their honeymoon, he felt angrier than ever. And in his anger he turned on Dick Livingstone, and said rather gloomily: "I suppose they think they're happy."

Quex had fought to the last, but "that infernal fellow" had held all the cards. Quex had seen that at the very beginning. He hadn't been in the least deceived when he got Tracey's insistent request for a month's leave with a terse alternative of resignation, and he knew that Hilda Altamont was still less deceived, because he had asked her.

"Do you want to marry him?" Quex was not a diplomatist where women of that type were concerned, and he couldn't be bothered to beat about the bush.

"We can't always marry the people we want to," was all that she had said, but he knew that her mind was made up. She didn't want George, and she never had wanted him. But she wanted her romance, and she had forced George into the part of the hero. And she had to marry someone. The only condition she had made was that she didn't go out to Bubuland for a year, and Quex had had to be satisfied. It wasn't the measure of satisfaction that his women had usually given him, but that was inevitable. She would amuse him for all that, and take his money and his hospitality, and in a year, if he was still master, something would happen.

For by a curious coincidence, it was just then becoming abundantly clear to a large section of the press that something must happen. The Bubuland Government were quite unable, so it was said, to maintain any

sort of order in the territory where the concessions lay. Every month brought to this section of the press more ominous reports of outrage, robbery and obstruction, with which the native governor and his ridiculous gendarmerie were utterly unable to deal. Tracey's achievement was admitted to have been in the circumstances very amazing. But his methods appeared to be too limited, having regard to the vast amount of capital at stake. His police force, for instance, only functioned within the area of the concessions, and merely dumped back on the native officials all malefactors caught within it. What was the use of that? the critics asked. Everyone knew that these people were never properly punished, and merely renewed their depredations in another area. A still more serious ground of complaint was urged against the Corporation methods by impatient shareholders, for it seemed that the iniquitous laxity in dealing with native delinquents was accompanied by a policy of intolerant severity against any European workmen or officials who might be guilty of lapses from western standards of morality in their dealings with the black men. There was even a rumor that one white man had been shot for killing a native, while it was certain that a number of them had been deported to Somaliland and then treated with unpardonable severity by civil servants who had come out from Oxford and Cambridge with no understanding of tropical conditions or the difficulties inseparable from missionary enterprise on behalf of a superior civilization.

These alarming reports had been referred to Tracey

by Quex with growing irritation, but Tracey, "another of these infernal fellows who won't say what they mean," had refused to be excited. He had insisted, on the contrary, that the situation was perfectly satisfactory, and actually suggested that his insistence on a month's leave was a proof of this. "Naturally, if there were the slightest danger of trouble in the near future," he had written, "I should not make the request."

Quex had handed this "amazing document," as he called it, to Livingstone with a terse: "Can you beat it?" But, of course, Livingstone had begun to stand up for his friend.

"Do you mean that you don't believe it?" he had asked angrily.

"Well," Quex had said, with a man-of-the-world leer, "we all know what he's really coming home for."

"Hadn't we better keep Hilda out of it?" Livingstone had asked.

"That's just my point. It would be better if we all did. Tracey won't; and he risks the interest of goodness knows how many shareholders to come back and get hold of her before someone else does."

"What a filthy thing to say!" Livingstone exclaimed.

Quex was annoyed. He ought to have remembered that "that infernal fellow" was ridiculously fussy where women of his own class were concerned. He pulled himself together and poured oil hurriedly on the troubled waters of his cousin's morbid refinement.

"Well, well, my dear Dick, you mustn't mind my board-school vocabulary. I haven't the advantage of a university education. All the same, it is rather a tall

order to pretend that the fact that he wants to marry a very charming girl—the straightest girl I ever met, I quite agree with you—doesn't weigh with a fellow in the least. Damn it all, he's made the same as we are, I suppose."

"Oh, well, perhaps so," Livingstone answered, swallowing the bait, and considerably mollified. "But you don't understand George, Quex, and you never will."

If Tracey remained complacently optimistic, Quex himself continued to show an unusual credulity. Instead of denying the rumors of impending disaster, he adopted a policy of statesmanlike reticence which sent them back into circulation with renewed energy. He took the same line with Tracey himself, maintaining with the utmost assurance that stronger measures were necessary.

"Unless you take the offensive—of course only under provocation and as the only means left to you," he said with the utmost emphasis, "you'll find the boot is on the other leg."

"Meaning?" Tracey asked.

"There'll be a concerted rising against one or more of the stations. . . . My reports are definite."

"Not your reports from me, Sir Artemas."

"No, I agree, my dear Colonel . . . your reports have breathed a spirit of the most refreshing calm." Quex didn't trouble to conceal a sneer at this unmilitary quality in his subordinate.

"The risk, after all—the personal risk, I mean—is mine, not yours, Sir Artemas." Tracey drew himself to his full height and looked at Quex with a certain

detachment. But Quex for once surprised him by looking back at him, full in the face, too.

"Yes, Colonel, the risk is yours. If you insist on taking it, don't blame me. But give me your answer before you go back." That was how he had left it, and now he was waiting for the answer.

Tracey was not worrying about the affair at all, naturally enough. In the first place he knew well enough that the trouble in Bubuland was mainly artificial. There were plenty of disgruntled chiefs who were ready to foment petty risings and rebellions, but when the time came they could be pretty easily conciliated by the necessary bribes. In the second place, he had come back to get married, not to talk politics. That Quex's suggestion to him for stronger action had any particular significance didn't occur to him for a moment. But he might have been less complacent if, instead of dallying with Amaryllis in the shade of Tracey Hall, he had been listening to Quex's conversation with Soulle on the evening after the wedding. "We must have an 'incident,' my dear Quex, an 'incident.' "

George Tracey, however, was listening to Hilda. How she had changed since that morning when she had thrown herself at his feet out of sheer bravado, and almost rekindled the excitement he had experienced when, as a boy of 21, he had gone out to conquer the world at the head of a half-company. Or perhaps he had changed? Ten months' arduous work, taken on to please the vicarious virtuosity of a schoolgirl's imagination at an age when a couple of days' hunting a week was all he felt inclined for, had coarsened him. Cer-

tainly he was not the man he had meant to become when he had put the world behind him four years ago.

Yet Hilda Altamont had changed more. She had belonged, when he left her behind, to his old life. And she had had her dreams. He came back to find her quite definitely anchored in the present. He guessed that Quex had been making love to her, and that he would go on doing so, but it wasn't that that worried him. On the contrary, it was her confounded readiness to look after herself which upset him.

"I believe you'd love to have to come home and protect me from importunate lovers, George," she said to him with a smile of sympathy for an older and simpler generation. "Artemas has only made love to me twice really seriously, you know."

"Why did you let him?" George asked, barely amused.

"It was such fun trying to stop him," was Hilda's eminently materialistic explanation, and even Tracey of Tracey Hall couldn't help laughing.

"And you did succeed?" Tracey asked when he had recovered his seriousness.

"Very nearly," Hilda answered, provocative to a degree. Her maneuver succeeded.

"Infernally tantalizing you must have been if you looked half as lovely as you do at this moment," George said after a moment's pause.

"You really like me?" she asked. "I thought men always found reality a little disappointing. I don't believe men would ever marry if it weren't for the fun of getting engaged."

"You seem to have thought a lot since I went away,

darling," George answered, appraising her radiant femininity with a masculine eye, but a little distrustful of her brains, which seemed to be peculiarly active.

"About you, I suppose I ought to say."

"Of course you ought to, but don't bother to." George gave her up . . . after all, he hadn't married her brains, and she was good to look at. But Hilda persisted.

"You wouldn't like a dutiful wife, would you, George?" she asked.

George Tracey just took her in his arms and kissed her, which, of course, was what she wanted, but he couldn't answer her question because he had suddenly found out the answer, and it was the wrong one. He didn't want a dutiful wife just at the moment, but he had meant to want one. Life was a funny thing.

There was, as a matter of fact, a curious air of impropriety about Hilda Altamont on her honeymoon which made George Tracey feel twenty years younger. The explanation was, of course, quite ludicrously simple. They weren't in the least in love with each other, and this relieved both of them of a terrible burden of responsibility. Neither was in the least afraid of hurting the other's feelings, or trampling on prejudices, or insulting sacred beliefs, or even of quarreling. What was there to quarrel about? Husbands and wives quarrel at length, and lovers in a blaze of passion, but men and women take what they can get from each other and pass on. Hilda took a good deal. She wasn't the type that goes all over Europe and comes back with a bangle. George's rugged masculinity called every weapon of her armory into play. When he was con-

ventionally ardent, she was demure; when he was cold, she was alluring; when he was tender, she was provocative; when he was sober, she was drunk with excitement; and when he was pleasantly exuberant, after dinner, she shocked him into something almost akin to passion.

It was the measure of his transformation, and, if he had only known, of the sagacity of Dick Livingstone's advice, that he found Tracey Hall impossible after two nights. This particular adventure needed staging, and a private suite in the most expensive hotel on the Riviera was the only possible setting. "What are *you* doing here, George?" was, of course, what everyone asked when he made his absurdly unexpected plunge into the half-world of Europe and the whole of American society. And when he explained that he was married, the joke was felt to be in the best of taste. Old General FitzJohns, indeed, told everyone it was the best thing he'd heard for years. And so it was, in one sense, for George's reputation as the clumsiest liar in the service saved his reputation for common sense and gained him infinite credit. Besides, it meant that they were asked everywhere together.

George Tracey, to do him justice, felt a little uneasy at times. But Hilda Altamont was simply triumphant. Incidents were coming thick and fast. What, after all, did the rest matter? She saw life for the first time with the eyes of a beautiful woman, and marriage is an incident in the lives of beautiful women. "A necessary precaution," as she put it with her taste for verbal fireworks, and the remark went down well. She had solved her riddle, and Quex, Bubuland,

Dick Livingstone, the rationalist press, the young Turks, the Bolsheviks, and all her fads and fancies ranged themselves suddenly as so much background for emotional experiences deliciously exciting if sufficiently varied. Old General FitzJohns, for instance. She only wanted to be sure that no one any more would just leave her sitting still and doing nothing. That was the unpardonable sin. Her own pent-up energies had found their outlet, but she must see the old world whirling round her if she was not to suffer later the horrors of duty and domestication. The incidents must continue. The world was just as she had always seen it, and just as exciting and romantic and "too wonderfully interesting," but now she had got it in the right place. She had been trying to hook herself on all these months just to one little piece of it, and now she had got it all round her revolving . . . revolving . . . and exciting. Yes: that was it. It was being excited personally that mattered, that made other things real. "Come along, George, time for a cocktail."

And then there was the dancing. George danced execrably, which was lucky, for it gave her a chance of new excitements, all innocent, of course. All excitements were innocent, once you were married: that was the charm of it.

And then came that too delightfully exciting telegram. "Bubuland situation critical, return at once, Quex."

CHAPTER TWELVE

TRACEY returned to find Quex at his most Napoleonic. Tracey's marriage had been long ago classified in Quex's mind as "discreditable," and by now his honeymoon appeared as an even more shameful dereliction of duty. It was not Hilda's fault, Quex said to himself. She had been trapped—almost seduced—into being an accomplice in an affair which was by now too disreputable even to be referred to except, with withering sarcasm, as "your unfortunate absence."

It was with this phrase that Quex began his alarming report of the Bubuland crisis. It was now perfectly clear that Tracey's India Office methods had failed utterly. "A fiasco" was the mildest term which Quex cared to use. It was now also clear that the Southern tribes had been arming secretly for months and that an attack on the concessions was momentarily expected. Tracey must go back and organize an unofficial defense force and save what could be saved—if anything—Quex was doubtful on that point—from utter ruin. It was, as he felt bound to point out, "a matter of mere decency to the shareholders."

Tracey listened to the lecture in an irritating silence. But when Quex, getting up from his desk, suggested that there was nothing more to be said, and actually moved towards the door, he found himself confronted

not with the outburst he half expected, but merely with George Tracey's still fairly athletic figure blocking his path.

"One moment, Sir Artemas," he said with what anyone less optimistic than Quex might have recognized as alarming suavity. "There's just one question I'd like to ask."

"Ask, my dear Colonel, by all means," Quex replied hastily, temporarily conciliated, as is the way of pinchbeck Mussolinis, by however minute an exhibition of physical force.

"Precisely who has been organizing the rising about which you've such opportune information?"

Quex sat down again. To say that he was disconcerted would be incorrect. He turned green.

Tracey repeated his question.

"Are you insulting my honor, Colonel Tracey?" Quex spluttered after a pause.

"I never tilt at windmills," Tracey snapped, and Quex had to do another bit of thinking.

"What the hell are you driving at?" he asked frantically. "You leave your post for reasons which . . . well . . . need I say more? . . ."

"You need not," Tracey interrupted. "If you want to refer to my wife you can call her by her name . . . it's a good enough one even for her."

Quex bit his lip, but went on:

"You leave your post, and the trouble I warned you about breaks out in your absence and you insinuate that I'm responsible."

"I've insinuated nothing," Tracy held on grimly to his advantage. "I asked a question which I repeat.

Who has been arming these natives? To put it more plainly, who has been telling your agent Leukopatras to do so?"

"Leukopatras!" Quex saw his chance and seized it. "You don't mean that that fellow whom I've been paying handsomely to give me the fullest reports has been behind all this trouble?"

"Of course he has. But I never knew till now that he was your agent, though I'd guessed it."

"Then you're only playing the fool with me, Colonel Tracey. . . . You insult me on a basis of guesswork. I'm not familiar, I fear, with the Army code of honor. . . . We have to work by more exacting standards."

"You score there, Sir Artemas. I'm afraid the British Army never pays a dividend."

Quex pulled himself together with a visible effort.

"Aren't we getting a little unnecessarily heated?" he went on in his best salary-reducing voice. "I quite see now how this fantastic misconception arose, because you guessed—quite rightly, I admit—that the man who was—and no doubt is—behind the trouble was my own agent. But you must realize, my dear Colonel, when you think it over, that it would be merely fantastic for me to organize an attack on my own property."

"I never suggested anything, so far, but I want to know what the political ramp is. Leukopatras has been mischief-making in Bubuland since Dick Livingstone and I were out there twenty years ago. First it was the Italians put him up to it. Then the French. Who is it now? You must know, if you know anything about it at all. If you don't, what right in God's earth had you to start this business?"

Quex breathed a sigh of relief. He saw a streak of daylight and went for it.

"May I suggest, Colonel, that you leave the political end to me. I may have—mind you, I don't say I have —information from the Colonial Office which would make things a good deal clearer. But as the custodian of the interests of thousands of shareholders I tell you this. It is imperative that our people out there should be properly armed and ready for trouble on an extensive scale. And I am bound to say that I look to you as the servant of the Company to go out and take charge of the lives and property entrusted to you." Quex felt safer among the clichés.

"I'm sailing by the next boat," Tracey said shortly, "but under whose orders is another matter. I want instructions in writing as to the information you've got, and the source of it. I propose then to go and find out what's known about it in certain quarters where these things are regarded from, shall we say, rather a different angle. Leukopatras can be stopped tomorrow if the proper methods are used, and unless I know that they are going to be used I'm not going out with any shadow of responsibility."

"If the Government intervene now, we are finished as a Corporation, my dear Colonel," Quex said, with a touch of frankness. "I can give you nothing in writing and am prepared if necessary to deny the whole of my information."

"You're frank, Sir Artemas," Tracey said with a smile which Quex utterly misunderstood.

"My dear Colonel, I'll be franker. There's more money in this than you realize. You and I will be very

rich men in a year or so . . . if we play our cards properly."

"How deliciously exciting! . . . Do forgive my breaking in." Hilda Altamont had come in quietly while Quex was speaking and was determined not to miss any secrets which might be going about.

"Delighted to see you, my dear Mrs. Tracey." Quex got up beaming from his chair. "I think your husband and I have really finished. You haven't eradicated all his suspicions yet, I find, but I'm sure you'll be ready to give me a good character."

"You haven't been going for him, have you, George?" Hilda asked, looking as impudent as she knew how. "You *are* unkind."

Tracey was uncomfortable, and looked it. He couldn't face the thought of running away, and he couldn't bring himself to go out again without knowing what the game was. And could he go out again if he did know?

"I think we must thrash the whole thing out," he said finally. "I must have full information and the most formal instructions from the Board before we can decide anything."

Quex was furious. Nothing annoyed him more than lip service to the silly fiction of the overriding authority of "the Board." It hurt his vanity and it reminded him unpleasantly of Courts of Appeal even higher, more foolish and more contemptibly middle-class. But Hilda Altamont for the second time in the secular history of Bubuland was playing the leading part. With her in the room he could afford to ignore this idiotic soldier who thought that a clear million of capital

was really at the beck and call of a Board of Directors and to appeal straight away to the English gentleman who knew well enough what he had to do to keep his hold over as intriguing a piece of femininity as ever missed the way from Surbiton to Deauville. And if the English gentleman chose to throw up the part . . . well . . . there were compensations.

"No, no, my dear Colonel," Quex said in his most charming manner. "Of course we shall have to have a Board meeting before you go, but the plain question is one which must be answered now. Either the lives of the men at the stations remain in your charge or you throw up the sponge and someone else takes on the responsibility. As Chairman of this Company I can't face for a single minute"—and Quex rapped on the desk with the tips of his fingers: an impressively restrained gesture which he had caught from the Soulle of honor—"I can't face for an instant a position where, in the event of this very serious trouble breaking out, there is no competent person definitely responsible."

"Of course George is responsible," Hilda said angrily. "Who else could be?"

"I'm only waiting for your husband, my dear Mrs. Tracey, to say that himself . . . but he seems a trifle, shall I say, nervous?"

"Of what?" Tracey asked.

"About going back to Bubuland, apparently," Quex sneered.

"I'm going back to Bubuland by the next boat, in any case. You seem to have forgotten that. . . . The point is whether I'm going out in your interests. The

answer depends entirely on what those interests are. I want facts, not company promoter's twaddle about the shareholders."

"My dear Colonel," Quex assumed his well-known rôle of Job in a traffic jam in Piccadilly. "I've told you that the political situation is in my hands. I've as good as told you that I am in the closest possible touch with the Colonial Office but that that part of my information is confidential. Direct Government intervention at this stage would be fatal, and I can't hear of it. The Government would go out at once. But we are all watching the situation as closely as anything was ever watched. I was up till three o'clock with Lord Soulle as recently as last night."

"You have my sincere sympathy, Sir Artemas. The point is, however, have the competent military authorities been given all this information, and do they agree to your proposals to send me out again to hold on, if necessary, by force?"

"The Colonial Secretary agrees, and I naturally conclude that he has consulted his advisers. Anyway, I'm not going to have a lot of soldiers organizing a first-class war over my property. There's far too much money at stake."

"Money!" Tracey was angry now. "Good God! There's money in all the gutters of the world, but that's no reason why you should expect me to stoop to pick it up."

For the first and last time in his life Quex was knocked, as Tracey put it to Livingstone, "clean off his perch." It was a small enough triumph perhaps to have silenced such a conspirator, but at the time, and,

extraordinary enough, to the end, Tracey felt proud of it. He seemed to think it well worth his career to have seen Quex sitting there like a balloon ignominiously deflated by what, after all, was only a pin-prick. But Tracey's exultation and Quex's really painful collapse lasted only just two minutes by the clock, though it seemed like a lifetime to Quex who saw his fortune in the balance, and Hilda Altamont—he couldn't think of her as anything else—playing with the scales.

But the sacrifice for her egoism was too hard. She had launched this band of argonauts; she had found the pilot; and the ship was not to turn back now and strand her on nothing a year at Tracey Hall with only the memory of a few hectic evenings to compensate for the loss of her illusions. It wasn't fair to her, and it was impossible for Quex . . . who had to be preserved as the exalted embodiment of grandiose conceptions matched to the golden dreams of her youth.

"I think you're both very, very tiresome," she said just to break the silence, but when neither of them took her on, her petulant pride took hold of her.

"Of course you're right, Sir Artemas. We've started this on our own, and we've all—all of us—got to stick to it. Can't you see that, George? Surely it's obvious."

"My dear, you don't understand the position in the least," Tracey said gently.

"For God's sake, don't be patient, George. . . . I can't stand it."

"Don't you see, my dear," he went straight on—soldiers always do when they're in doubt, a fact which accounts in some measure for the size of the National

Debt—"that I'm waiting for Sir Artemas's answer? I'm not going to take on the responsibility for dealing with a local rising with half a dozen shotguns and a horde of navvies. I must know what the situation is and make proper arrangements either here or with the authorities on the spot for dealing with it effectively. What use am I to anyone if I just go out and get half my men killed because no proper arrangements have been made?"

Quex looked at Hilda with an air of resignation, but he got a flash of those gray eyes which gave him his cue.

"You've got all the information I can give you, Colonel Tracey, and I must ask you formally whether you are ready to fulfil your contract with the Company?"

"My answer is to offer my resignation," Tracey said without a moment's pause.

"I refuse to accept it. You're the only man, I'm told, whom the tribes in the South are frightened of. . . . My duty is quite clear."

"Then I shall go back," Tracey snatched at a solution seen in a flash of self-abnegation, "and carry on for three months only. At the end of that time, if I have not got the information and assurance which you refuse today, I shall come back. If you ignore the warning (I shall give it you in writing) and make no arrangements for my successor, the responsibility will be yours."

"His Royal Highness gives us a reprieve," Quex sneered. "Of course you realize that as a matter of duty to the shareholders I shall have to instruct the

Company's solicitors to claim against you for breach of contract."

"Oh, well, many things may happen in three months," Tracey said gravely. "Come along, Hilda, we'd better have some lunch."

"Dick has got a table for—er—for all of us," Hilda said pointedly. "That's what I came in to tell you."

"Where is Dick?" Tracey asked, embarrassed as only an explorer can be.

"In his room, I suppose. I don't see him in the waste-paper basket." Hilda was enjoying herself. Tracey turned rudely on his heel and went out, leaving his wife with Quex. He had to think things out.

Quex labored under no such disability and became aggressively cordial.

"Your excellent husband is not a business man," he said kindly: "but perhaps you've found that out."

"I think it's awful the way men quarrel about nothing." Hilda clung desperately to the fence.

"The point is, my dear, that it's not about nothing. It's the whole future of a good many thousand people and a territory twice the size of Ireland that worries me."

"Do you mean that?" Hilda asked, fired by a memory and touched to sentiment by something dangerously near to a regret. The future was closing down on her, and she had to fight. She felt as if she needed room to breathe.

"I think you're very brave."

She heard Quex's soothing voice through a haze of conflicting emotions. Why couldn't her dream come true? Other people's dreams always did. She saw

everything escaping her—position and wealth and the light and laughter which was the accompaniment of her unvarying successes. And what for? That the owner of Tracey Hall might be able to shrug his shoulders and thank his own strange God that he was not a successful man. It really was rather discreditable—Quex's epithets just now were near the surface of her mind. Quex was so different. Quex held on, and went on to the last. "Very brave": if she had been capable of bravery she wouldn't be clinging on to the last straws of hope when she knew the first gust of wind would blow them out of her reach. After all, George had never asked her or cared what she thought . . . never looked at her . . . just left her to swallow her pride, with Quex sitting watching the operation.

"Why doesn't he come back?" she exclaimed pitiably, her courage gone with the ultimate analysis.

"My dear, shall I go and find him?" Quex's practiced gallantry came easily to the surface. But the answer remained unspoken.

"We'll see this through together," Quex said after a pause poignant with unspoken abandonment of a mistaken beginning. "You know you can trust me."

"If I could trust myself!" She urged on herself a belated plea for caution.

"My dear Hilda, a woman who trusts herself will trust anyone!"

Oh! that voice from the meaningless past! How she hated Dick Livingstone at that instant as he strolled into the room keyed up for a scene. Yet his entry had its merits, too. He had sent Tracey to his club to lunch in the solitude becoming to a recalcitrant

Empire builder, and had come himself to pick up the broken crockery with the disinterested audacity becoming in a soldier of fortune.

"Hasn't George told you?" Hilda turned to the unwelcome intruder as if he were the family doctor who had been dallying over his port while his patient died tactlessly upstairs.

"Oh, he said something about resigning," Livingstone said lightly enough, "but I'm going to have a talk with George about that later. He often does this sort of thing, but . . ."

Quex interrupted him angrily. "He won't do it again with me, Dick. I'm not going to have any bargaining with my servants behind my back, and I tell you straight. In any case, Coloney Tracey's made up his mind. Hilda agrees with me. There's nothing more to be done."

"How do you mean, Hilda? What do you agree about?"

"Oh, don't worry me!" Hilda felt that she was being led back to the crossroads and she was indefinably unwilling. Besides, they might get on to religion at any moment.

"Well, let's come and have some lunch at any rate. We can't do any good by starving. . . . I've got a table."

"Damn your table. . . . Can't you see I don't want to be sociable? I really think you're stupider than George. . . . Besides, Artemas has asked me to lunch with him."

Livingstone looked at his cousin, sitting almost unruffled at his enormous desk bare of papers, and watch-

ing like a cat the uncomfortable attitudinizing of so many mice. But he said nothing, for the excellent reason which women never understand: there was nothing to say. He just strolled out as he had strolled in, and left Hilda to say the moment his back was turned that he never did anything to help.

"Oh, he's a charming fellow, Dick," Quex said in the matter-of-fact tone of one to whom charm and inefficiency were interchangeable terms. "Where did I say we'd lunch?" Quex never let an intrigue, however innocent, lose its savor, and his smile was distinctly confidential.

"I want an expensive lunch and a lot of champagne," Hilda said hectically—she had to get the world revolving once more. "I suppose I've got to knock some sense into George afterwards, haven't I?"

"Perhaps he thinks he's got to knock some into somebody else," Quex said enigmatically. He had come out hardly triumphant—indeed only just safe—from the most infernally nasty half-hour of his placid life and he wasn't going to take any risks . . . till the Bubuland boat sailed with Tracey safely on board.

"Of course, if you're going to take George's part against me," Hilda began, but broke off into a smile. She wanted her lunch, and in any case she knew how to manage Quex. Women always do know how to manage the other man.

But she didn't realize that Quex wasn't just the other man. He was Quex, and he had just had the fact pointed out to him in a particularly unpleasant way. Tracey must go. That kind of fellow in an undertaking of that sort was impossible. Soulle had warned

him only three weeks ago that he had got the wrong stamp of man, and it would take more than Hilda's tempting effrontery or any amount of champagne to make him lose sight of the imperative necessity of getting Tracey out of the country before he began to air his grievances. Thank God he could trust him, if he once got out there, to do the right thing when the big move came off. And he couldn't have Hilda throwing herself at him out of sheer pique and sending her outraged husband straight round to the War Office to give the show away. It was he who had got to "take George's part" . . . till George was out of the way.

He found it infernally difficult.

The trouble was, of course, that Hilda had no idea what the trouble was. She didn't know, and she couldn't find out. She had expected Quex to unburden his soul and go down on his knees to her for help. She would have enjoyed that. It would have put her right into the center of the picture where she belonged, while she would exercise a woman's privilege of taking what she wanted and leaving the rest over for another time. But it didn't turn out like that. They talked about the weather and the wine and the Riviera, and her conquests on that rather easy battle-ground. But never a word of Bubuland.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked finally, in desperation.

Quex had been dreading this question. Of course it was bound to come, but he couldn't tell her that she had done everything he wanted already and that as far as she was concerned this was the end. He didn't mean it to be the end, for one thing.

"At the moment, my dear, there's nothing to be done. George won't change his mind, you see."

"Of course he will, if I ask him," was her reply, but it carried no conviction to Quex at all.

"I think we ought to let him get back and leave him to learn his lesson," Quex said after a pause. . . . "You'll see that a lot will happen in the next two months. We've got our Rubicon to cross."

"You're very serious, Artemas." Hilda looked temptingly disappointed. Quex made a mental note.

"It's the beginning of a new world for me, my dear," he said, as they got up from lunch: and waited for her denial.

"You're very odd today," she said rather wearily as he showed her into a taxi. "It's the old world I want to get back . . . and you don't help me."

Hilda was frightened.

There had been a new definiteness about Quex which was almost threatening. What was going to happen in two months out there in Bubuland where she had buried her girlhood's dreams, and what was only just beginning here in London when she had anchored herself as she had thought to the unchanging reality? It was her new routine of compromises and excitements, her claim to go on sharing in the succession of those incidents which make up the life of women in cities that she had seen denied by George without so much as a question thrown at her across the non-committal luxury of Quex's office. She wanted to go on, and she was angry at the hint of interruption.

The excitement of having Quex making love to her if she lifted an eyebrow was just part of what she wanted to go on with. She didn't want to begin again without George, who loved her, or without her background of adventure which she loved, and which was to display her in due course to an admiring world. But over the new reality of her worldliness and the new worldliness of her dreams Quex had thrown a spell which was almost sinister. She didn't want to begin all over again. She wanted to go on. Why couldn't things just go on? Surely it was not necessary for this that she should live at Surbiton or marry a stockbroker. And in a moment of petulant regret she wondered why she had been rude to poor Dick Livingstone, who could always give at least six convincing answers to any question.

When she got back to the Ritz—she had insisted on staying at the Ritz "for the credit of Bubuland"—she rang him up at his club. She got on to him at once. Of course she might have known that with his uncanny eye for a situation he would be waiting there expecting this. Yet he didn't seem actually to jump at the idea of talking to her.

It was half an hour before he arrived.

She spent the time trying quite fruitlessly to get some news of her husband. How like a man to be missing at the very moment when there was so much to talk about. Her reflections on this strange defect of masculine psychology were interrupted only by Livingstone's arrival.

"Hullo, Hilda! You've come back from Elba, I see. Unscathed, I hope?"

"Oh, I think so," Hilda laughed. She had to do that or cry.

"Excellent." Livingstone settled himself down in a corner of the large sofa and lit a cigarette. "Now I suppose you want to know what it's all about?"

"Damn what it's all about, Dick," Hilda said, reassured by the presence of that curious specimen, the disinterested male, in such close proximity. "It's 'it' I want to get rid of. I want to get back to where we were."

"Good Lord, my dear girl, you don't mean you want to start your honeymoon over again with the same man?"

"Now you're being silly, Dick. . . . No, I only want to get back to where we were this morning."

"Well, if it's not an indelicate question, where were you?" Livingstone was determined to avoid heroics for a quarter of an hour at least.

Hilda laughed. "I'm glad to see that 'it' doesn't make you serious at any rate."

"'Life doesn't cease to be amusing because people die,' if you remember that very wise remark," Livingstone said more soberly. "Seriously, what's the trouble?"

"There isn't any trouble, in your sense. I mean I've not run away from George, or he from me—at least, as far as I know—and we haven't quarreled. . . . And Quex hasn't started (or barely started) making love to me again, and if he did I should probably say what I said last time. . . . No, there's nothing which the disinterested male could take any pleasure in."

"What else, then?"

"Just that George wants to cut and run, and I won't be run off with and I'm afraid of being run away from. . . . Life's the trouble. I want to go on with it. . . . George doesn't."

"Life. . . . Yes. . . . I've heard of that particular difficulty cropping up now and again," Livingstone smiled rather grimly. "What did George say? . . . He said he'd knocked my disreputable cousin off his perch and seemed deucedly pleased about it, but beyond that I couldn't get much out of him. He's so infernally tactful, is George."

"Tact! There wasn't much tact about him this morning," Hilda exclaimed. "He just chucked up everything and left me there looking on. I've not seen him since. He seems to think it's got nothing to do with me. . . . Good Lord, Dick, it's awful, after all this!"

"My dear girl, what's so awful about it? People like George resign every other day from something and nobody minds."

"Nobody minds because no one understands," Hilda exclaimed angrily. "For God's sake don't tell me you don't understand!"

Livingstone would have given a lot not to have understood so well. But it was all so obvious. She had engaged herself to Tracey to show Quex her power and then married the lonely soldier from the tropics because she had sent him there and was going to keep him there. Now the lonely soldier was coming back.

"I think I do," Livingstone answered. "You think George has let you down."

"Oh, of course George has let us all down." Hilda's anger was coming to the surface in spite of her. "But it goes deeper than that. It's that terrible British oak we used to laugh about. . . . God! how I wish I could laugh now. Dick! you've got to make him go back. Promise me you will."

"But if it's a question of honor?"

"I simply don't believe it is," was all Hilda said, but Livingstone was too honest to take advantage of a quibble.

"Of course it's a question of honor," he said brutally.

"And you won't help me?"

"Of course I will, Hilda, you know that . . . if there's anything to be said on the other side . . ."

"There's just my life on the other side," Hilda said bitterly; "if that counts."

"My dear Hilda"—Livingstone felt that the absurd scene had gone far enough—"this is sheer melodrama. Do tell me what you want me to do."

"It's no good saying all over again, is it, Dick?" She was tired now and quite hopeless. "I can see you don't understand just the least little bit. . . . You, who always pretend to understand everything. Quex understands."

"Nonsense, Hilda. Quex neither knows nor cares tuppence about anything but his business."

"That's just where you are all wrong." Hilda was going to make the most of what was left to her out of the shipwreck. "He does at least understand that George has been just cruel to me."

"And so you want to be cruel to George in turn?" Livingstone saw the hopelessness of it, but felt he must

at least say his lines. "Surely that isn't a good foundation for happiness."

"Why not tell George that? But of course you won't, for you think I'm just being selfish. Can't you see that it isn't an attitude of mine that's in question? . . . It's just me . . . my whole flesh and blood, which George thinks he can turn into a piece of pretty early Victorian furniture for his moldy old place in the country . . ."

"Whereas you want to turn George into a smart photograph on the mantelpiece of your bachelor flat in London." Livingstone at heart was not a feminist.

"Nonsense! You know that isn't true." Hilda was really angry now.

"Just as true as your account, my dear girl," Livingstone answered, trying to keep his temper.

"But it's impossible that George should really think that any decent sort of woman is going to be put quietly on the shelf without so much as an explanation."

"My dear Hilda, of course George will explain. If I know anything of the old bird he'll explain for several hours on end. Point is, will you listen? Not if I know you, Hilda. . . . Now just look here. The whole point is that you didn't marry George; you married the uncrowned king of Bubuland whose photograph was going to be in all the papers, who was going to get untold gold, a lot of credit, and possibly even an honor or two out of it. Now you find that the uncrowned king is turning into a blameless country gentleman and you're in the soup."

"But for the fact that it's not so damnably funny as you suggest, Dick, that's about it . . . but yet it

isn't. Oh, my God, if only someone could really understand. . . . You don't know what a little enthusiasm and a little adventure, and a contact with life on the unemotional side means to me, and to hundreds of us. It's not my battle alone, this, Dick. If I was the only one, I would go and bury myself anywhere, even in Suffolk, tomorrow, just to get peace and quiet. But I daren't. I couldn't face my life if I let myself be trailed about at George's coat-tails like a pet dog, with all these months of planning and hoping and working just so much waste . . . an idle woman's silly hobby. Oh! Dick, for God's sake promise me to help. I don't want to have to go to Quex: but he's the only one of you I can trust."

"Are you sure?" Dick asked quickly.

"In a way . . . yes." Hilda shrank from an unqualified acceptance of Quex's sinister championship.

"Oh, Quex won't do anything for nothing," was Livingstone's brutal commentary. "You're right enough there. But what is he going to do . . . at the worst?"

"At the worst? What do you mean, Dick?"

"What I say, Hilda. . . . You don't want to be treated as an early Victorian, do you?"

Hilda, desperate as she was, had to confess her willingness to hear the plainest of plain English.

"Well, then, if you let Quex make you his mistress . . ."

"How dare you!" Surbiton got the better of Cambridge, and a Victorian uncle of a mother who was no better than she should be.

"Please don't, Hilda." Dick Livingstone, keyed up

at last, was facing the issue. "We are talking seriously, on the assumption that our fathers and mothers, or rather the fathers and mothers of my generation, were wrong in considering that women were a piece of domestic furniture combining spasmodically beauty with utility and fetching a high or low price according to the nature of the combination. If you want to appeal to my Victorian chivalry, ask me to take you to a night club, make me drunk, and then extract a thousand promises from me in exchange for an avuncular kiss. If you want me to talk to you seriously as a super-twentieth century woman equal to two middle-aged men in energy, brains and sensibility, let's face the issue."

"I only heard half of that," Hilda sighed wearily, "but do go on. If I become Quex's mistress. . . . I don't see why you don't ask me whether I'm not that already, while you're about it. . . . What then . . . will a thunderbolt fall?"

"If you do what Quex wants . . . and we both know perfectly well what he wants . . . what difference is it going to make to your happiness?"

"My happiness! I'd forgotten all about that." Hilda was on the verge of breaking down, but Livingstone felt that he had to go on. George might come wandering back at any moment.

"Well, then, your life, if you like? Is all this wandering round London entertaining financiers and contractors and politicians and second-rate people of every conceivable profession really so exciting that you can't give it up?"

"I don't mean to have it given for me." Hilda, her

self-control more or less regained, was just sullen. "I want you to tell George he's got to make up his mind to that. I'm going to remain Quex's secretary, whatever he does, and I'm going to live my own life, not anyone else's."

"Why not tell him yourself, my dear?" Livingstone said after a pause. "He may listen to you."

"Not if it's a question of 'honor' as you call it," Hilda said bitterly enough. "George is the type of man who thinks 'honor' is a man's business."

"Yes. George would." Livingstone spoke his thoughts out loud, but stopped himself before adding the expression of his inmost conviction that George was perfectly right. "But you've not forgotten that he's going out for three months at least. Perhaps he'll change his mind when he gets back."

"He won't, Dick; you know that. It's all hopeless. I see that now. I oughtn't to have worried you."

"Good Lord, why not?" Livingstone was taken aback at her abrupt dismissal of her chosen counselor. "But you'd much better talk to George himself. . . . You have an argument there, you know, which I haven't got."

"Thus speaks the bachelor, Dick," Hilda laughed, almost at her ease now she saw that even the ingenious Dick Livingstone could see no solution except the obvious one which was staring them both in the face. "Don't you realize that George thinks that his wife's affectionate and undying devotion is a queer mixture of duty and privilege with the grace and favor entirely on the other side? So it is, honeymooning on

the Riviera. . . . But not at Tracey Hall; no, thank you."

Livingstone laughed. "Well, well, we've talked a lot of nonsense, but I expect when old George is safely anchored out in Bubuland in three weeks' time he'll forget all about this and then you'll be laughing at me for having taken his scruples too seriously. But till that happens . . . good-by."

"Not good-by, Dick?" Hilda might be the modern woman to her finger-tips, but she was chock-full of sentiment. "Don't let's be absurd. . . ."

"But don't you realize that I'm out of this now?"

"So that's all your chivalry amounts to," Hilda turned on him blazing with angry excitement. "You and George cut and run and leave me to face it out with a man you're too infernally proud to be associated with. And you're worse than George, infinitely worse. George at least had the decency to say what he thought about Quex to his face, and in front of me. You're going to slink off without lifting a finger to help anyone."

Livingstone, the consummate diplomatist, simply sat down again. For a moment or two neither spoke. The silence was oppressive to both of them, and Hilda broke down first.

"Haven't you got any answer, except just to sit there looking like a tailor's dummy?"

But Livingstone didn't answer.

"For God's sake say something or go!" Hilda was desperate.

"Very well, then, I'll tell you something which

George should have told you himself. This business isn't clean. We don't know or care what the game is, but it's certain that someone, with Quex's knowledge at the least, is working trouble in Bubuland which will break out at any moment. George is asked to go out and look after it alone without information or assistance from anyone. Why? Because someone wants trouble, and wants to see that it's started by the other side. A few lives lost, a little damage to property and then, what?"

"What?" Hilda echoed impatiently.

"War, of course," Livingstone said curtly. "Any fool can see that. It's the same game that's been played since the world began. Work up an atmosphere of hostility—perfectly easily when you bribe a corrupt Government to give you half somebody else's country over the heads of the inhabitants—then call in the soldiers to safeguard your profits at the expense of somebody else."

"That's all a fairy tale," Hilda sneered. "You know Quex's hatred of wars of that kind."

"George and I don't think it is," Livingstone went on patiently. "None of the soldier people over here know anything except a lot of vague rumors reported by their agents which they've been told to disregard. But they're quite alive nevertheless to the fact that something's up. And it's going on pretty high up. That's happened before, too. . . . Ever heard of the Jameson Raid?"

"For God's sake don't start talking politics. . . . I could face religion almost better than that." Hilda felt her confident pride ebbing away, with nothing—

literally nothing—to take its place. "Anyway, what good does all this miserable business do? Nobody's going to care tuppence if the whole staff of the Corporation resigns tomorrow. Quex is going on, and whatever the trouble is he'll come out on top."

"Very probably," Livingstone said grimly. "We live in an age when people like Quex do come out 'on top.' George and I don't. That's what you won't face in the way George's wife ought to face it."

"George isn't facing anything. He's just running away."

"George is taking the biggest risk a man ever took in his life," Livingstone answered hotly.

"Yes, for three months," Hilda sneered. . . . "You can't build up a country twice the size of Ireland in three months, can you?"

"Probably not. But you can save your immortal soul in even shorter time. . . . Look here, Hilda, you've got to come out of this. Before George comes back, promise me to stand by him. There's precious little decency left in public life at the moment, but there's a change coming and all this chicanery and bribery and dishonesty is going to look pretty nasty. You don't want to be mixed up in it when the truth comes out."

"I think you're just finding excuses for George, and I suppose it's decent of you." Hilda was determined not to be led into an argument. "But I think you're both wrong. I'm going on with my own life, and you'll see I'm right. I know I can trust Quex, and you know it too. You know perfectly well that this Bubuland business is going through whatever you and George

say. You've as good as told me that. And why should I be the only person to give up anything? I've lived for this show for the last eighteen months, and I'm going on. I shall tell George so, when he condescends to come in."

Hilda got up, and the consummate diplomatist, conscious of his failure, got up too, and hoped for the best.

"I shall see you the day after tomorrow," was his last remark as he got to the door.

"Why the day after tomorrow?" Hilda Tracey asked, cold as stone.

"Because you'll be at Tilbury seeing George off to Bubuland," Livingstone said gravely.

"If he goes," Hilda said casually. "I gather he's not too keen about it."

"He'll go all right," Livingstone answered. "Whether he'll come back is another matter." And the consummate diplomatist, very conscious of success, left with a heavy tread.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

QUEX, for all his confident malignancy, slept none too easily in his bed on the night of his quarrel with Tracey. His anger grew with his fears. It was, of course, utterly inconceivable that anybody in his senses would throw up the prospect of really good money for a scruple which he couldn't even explain. There must be something behind it, and that something, of course, was Hilda. To Quex's extraordinary mind there was something almost degraded about a man who gave up money-making on such flimsy pretexts for so utterly selfish a reason. Damn it all, there were women in Bubuland.

If Tracey had asked to have his salary doubled Quex would have agreed because he would have understood exploiting a situation in that kind of way. It would have almost pleased him to discover so much horse-sense in a fellow like that. But this middle-class talk about honor covering up a nasty piece of jealousy—yes, of course, jealousy was at the bottom of all this! What a fool he was not to have seen it before.

But what if Tracey really had the ear of anybody at the Colonial Office? What if he got them to believe his story? Everything was quite safe, of course, because nothing would happen till he told that fool Leukopatras—who, incidentally, had been infernally careless—that he was ready. But the bottom would

rather come out of the business end; after all, he wasn't a five per cent. man, and till the Government stepped in and took over this country there couldn't be more than that in it. Besides, he had sold nearly all his shares by now.

The morning post brought him a registered letter from Tracey, which did nothing to ease his mind. The letter confirmed his undertaking to go out for three months, but it contained a nasty sentence about "organized unrest which I am determined to trace to the source and to report to the proper authorities as soon as I leave the service of the Corporation." And the fellow was kind enough to give the name of his solicitors "in case the Corporation decide, in spite of the peculiar circumstances, to proceed against me for breach of contract."

Quex took up the telephone and rang up the Soulle of honor. Luckily that eminent non-conformist statesman was sleeping at home and Quex was soon breathing his aggrieved confidences into his ear, while George Tracey slept soundly, utterly unconscious of the chain of events which his rigidity had set in motion.

Hilda, after her hour with Livingstone, had made no effort to stem the torrent of George's virtuous indignation expressed over a bottle and a half of Liebfraumilch '21 in the restaurant at the Ritz. She could argue with Dick Livingstone, for he loved words and understood them. She had never discussed anything with George. He had always done things simply because she asked him, and this unbelievable exception left her speechless. She just asked him once at the end of the dinner to go on with the business for her

sake, and he just said that it was impossible. He could never look her in the face again if he did that. "How like a man," she thought, half tenderly, half bitterly. She hadn't even told him that she meant to stand by the great Quex for the sake of the integrity of her adventure. George, when he did ultimately wake up, a good hour after Quex's uneasy speculations had driven him to the telephone, thought about that aspect of the matter for the first time and dismissed it at once. Perhaps she would go down to Tracey Hall and wait for him. Or perhaps she would rather stay on in town. It would be more amusing for her. Anyway . . .

He got up and dressed with the comfortably methodical way of a man who has got nothing in the world to worry about. He didn't share Dick Livingstone's gloomy views as to the risks he might be running in Bubuland simply because he had never thought about himself any more than he had thought about his wife. It was a case where the public interest was involved, and there it began and ended. If there was anything uppermost in his mind it was a vague curiosity as to what that fellow Quex, with his funny company-promoting little mind, was really up to.

But Quex, over his breakfast meditating on Soulle's generous sympathy, was a happier man than George Tracey was, when he suddenly, also at breakfast, found himself face to face with the incredible reality.

"Don't you see it's just as impossible for you to go on with this business as it is for me?" was his first naïve expression of what it never occurred to him for a moment to regard just as "a point of view." He

wasn't, you see, even in the first analysis, modern. He never debated in his mind such possibilities as that Christ never existed, that the sanctity of marriage was a solar myth, or that patriotism was a tribal taboo. By the unfortunate accidents of birth and breeding he had escaped that wider outlook which we associate with Bloomsbury, the new theology and the international mind. Mind, national or otherwise, was not, as we have seen, Tracey's strong point. He was content to rely on laboriously fashioned conceptions of right and wrong which, in the old life of the hills and the desert, had stood him in good stead. It was so easy just to do your duty, and it came naturally to him to have his every problem decided for him by the fashion of his ancestors, molded for them by the infinite wisdom of a God who, if not actually English, was at least a beneficent onlooker at the progress of our race.

And naturally these simple ancestral fashions were set every bit as much for his wife's as for his own guidance. This affair of Bubuland had simply become "impossible," and there it remained.

Hilda, keyed up to an irrevocable decision, was sympathetic; partly because she was modern and honestly believed that there were two sides to every question, but mainly because she was captured by the meretricious glamour of impending disaster. She never asked him again to change his mind: she didn't even try to justify herself, perhaps because the conceptions at the root of such philistinism had been eradicated by three years' study at Cambridge under a generation equally ignorant of Paley, Huxley, and Acton.

"You see, George, I just feel that I must go on, and you just feel that you mustn't, and we must just make up our minds to disagree. It isn't such a very terrible thing, is it, to disagree with each other over a thing of this sort?"

George was out of his depth. He couldn't effect any sort of contact with people who didn't agree in fundamentals.

"The question is, surely, whether you're right in wanting to go on with it. After all, I don't profess to be clever, but surely a thing doesn't become right just because you feel you want to do it?"

"If it wasn't right for me, I shouldn't want to do it, George: I only want you to understand that. I think it's dreadful for you to back out now and leave Quex with all that responsibility, but I know you don't, and Dick said something to me last night which has helped me to understand just a bit."

"What did the great Dick say?" Tracey smiled. He knew how Dick must have enjoyed the argument.

"He said it wasn't going to be very safe in Bubuland in the next month or so, and . . . well, I thought I began to see why you were ready to go out for a bit at any rate."

"Oh!" Tracey was infinitely relieved. "You needn't think, darling, that I'm going into the jaws of death. I don't imagine anything much will happen just yet. It may never happen, for anything I know. That's the whole point, as a matter of fact. If I had the information I ought to have, I might just possibly go on."

"But surely you can trust Quex?" Hilda saw a tiny gleam of light.

"Good Lord, no!" Tracey said with a laugh. "You can't trust anyone in that way unless you know that he's working with the same object as yourself. If this were a Government show and Quex was the office-wallah running the show from this end, of course I'd trust him with both feet, because we should both be after the same thing. It wouldn't matter tuppence if he was the biggest scoundrel unhung in private life. But when you get into business, the object of the man who owns the business is to make money, and I'm not going to pick money out of the gutter for anyone. Quex is not worried about the future of Bubuland, or the comfort and health of his men (as long as they get the work done) or the good name of England, still less about decent dealing for its own sake . . . there's nothing to keep him straight, and better men than your devoted admirer have gone damnably crooked in that sort of circumstance."

Tracey paused, ruminating, and then found himself going on, almost unexpectedly.

"I've known fellows in the Regiment work like niggers for twenty years for the sake of the Old Country, and risk their lives a hundred times because it was their tradition, and then go out into civil life and run hopelessly amuck . . . bogus companies, dummy directorships, secret commissions even. Nothing to keep 'em straight, you see, and the knowledge that money was waiting for them at the end of every crooked lane they chose to wander down. Life's a sticky business, Hilda,

unless you're content with a hard day's work, and your own vine and fig tree."

Hilda didn't argue any more. Moralists could preach; but she knew the life she wanted, and she meant to have it. She wanted excitement and money and incidents. Babies and church on Sunday, and the parson to supper once a fortnight, were not in her style. She hated hurting George, and she knew she was hurting him, but the gulf was too deep to bridge.

And so the hours slipped by in a gentle atmosphere of unspoken regrets till Tracey went for the second time in the service of the great Quex to Bubuland, and for the second time Hilda and Dick Livingstone watched his tall figure standing in the bows as the ship glided slowly out of sight.

Captured by the glamour of a sentimental occasion, Hilda shed a decorous tear. Dick Livingstone, touched perhaps to subtler issues, remained staring out over the gray waters of the Thames till Hilda told him to come away.

"We seem to have done this before," he said vaguely, as they got back on to Tilbury platform. "We shan't do it again, I suppose."

"Oh well, we don't know what's going to happen, do we? I wonder what George really thinks?"

"George never thinks," Livingstone laughed, "but he sometimes knows."

"I mean about the real situation out there," Hilda explained herself, rather shamefacedly.

"I'm dead certain that he neither knows nor cares tuppence about it. But I've told him to send a wire

when he gets out there. . . . I fancy he'll find the things a good bit changed."

"Oh! Dick, I'm sure he ought never to have come back."

"Whatever is going to happen would have happened anyway . . . sometime," Dick said, not quite easy in his mind all the same.

"You don't really think anything awful is going to happen, do you?" Hilda Tracey nerved herself to ask the question, but Livingstone wisely evaded it.

"My philosophy is that nothing that happens is really awful," he said quietly, and by mutual consent they let the matter drop.

And so, for that matter, did Quex, as soon as he had got off a cipher telegram to Leukopatras.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN Tracey arrived at Berbera he made his number at Government House and spent a long morning with the officials. The talk might not have been quite to Quex's taste, because it mainly concerned the activities of that highly confidential agent Leukopatras, which were by no means a sealed book in British official circles. But the more Tracey pressed for information the clearer it was made to him that international complications peremptorily forbade a single British soldier crossing to the frontier. And no machine guns could be bought—or even stolen . . . that possibility was discussed, but reluctantly rejected because it would have been impossible without official collusion to get them over the frontier.

It was all much as Tracey had expected. The question whether Leukopatras was being paid by the Italians, by the French, or by Quex was easily answered: he was, of course, being paid by all three. But this aspect of the question didn't worry Tracey for a moment. His worries on this score were washed out once and for all by his resignation. He was simply concerned now with holding on until his successor arrived. He hurried on up-country to make a tour of the camps.

The concessions of the Bubuland Corporation were spread over a vast area, the nearest being two of the

cattle ranches, which were not more than seventy-five miles from the frontier. The mining concessions and a third cattle ranch were another eighty miles inland, while the sixth concession, the largest in area of all, was forty miles further inland again. The ranches were already partially stocked and fenced and it was here that trouble was most frequent, the Bubuans being born and bred as cattle thieves of no mean skill.

Indeed, any rising of a determined kind could clear the whole of the cattle off the outlying concessions, but Tracey felt that to arm his own native gangs would nevertheless be the merest folly. The great Quex had never been on a cattle ranch in his life and was not a military expert, but if any simple machinery was wanted for providing the discontented elements among the tribes with arms and ammunition free of charge, nothing more effective could have been suggested.

The more Tracey thought of it the more convinced he was that he was faced, or, rather, would be faced with a deliberately criminal attempt by a few hired bravoes to stimulate racial feeling by the bribe of some exceptionally fine pedigree stock. Once a show of that kind started it could be trusted to spread of its own impetus while the assiduous apostles of Bubuland for the Bubus—who themselves could be written down, without waiting for the police reports, as dagoes from the less sanitary slums of Aden—vanished silently into the interior to meditate on the follies of men who paid large sums in gold for small and congenial services. To attempt to meet a threat of this kind by arming his own natives would be purely suicidal.

Of course, Tracey interviewed at the first opportu-

nity the Bubuan Governor and his officials, but they did nothing but congratulate themselves on the amazing tranquillity which prevailed.

"How long will it last, your Excellency?" Tracey had asked, with his hand significantly on the butt of his revolver, but his question was met with a shrug of shoulders and the offer of a cup of coffee. He had also asked, of course, for assurances of immediate support in the event of trouble and of course had received them, but Tracey had been more interested to learn that the Governor was proceeding on leave in ten days' time. "This place is so dull . . . so very dull," he had said, with a sad smile, as one boulevardier talking to another. "We must take pleasures, as you say it. Perhaps you too will come north with me to our capital . . . to see the ladies." And George Tracey made a mental note that more than conjugal fidelity would probably require the refusal of an invitation prompted by obviously cynical generosity.

The upshot of it all was that when Tracey had been a week in the country he had learnt nothing except that he had in all human probability only another ten days to learn anything at all. That the Governor would "see the ladies" in Ibbas-Ibba he did not for a moment doubt, but his intentions had a more definitely oriental flavor. Bubuland Governors avoided trouble as they did the plague, and, incidentally, a good bit more successfully. Tracey decided for his part to stay and to fight. Quex's prescience on this point was justified, even if Quex's methods were not to be Tracey's.

It was just a little harder than it sounded. They had something like fifty rifles scattered over some hun-

dred square miles of territory . . . three cars, twenty horses and a number of mules. But when it came to white men, to use the term in the merest physical interpretation, there were only a dozen directly responsible to him. And three of these drank. The work on the railway—still in its earliest stages—and the equipment of the mines, was being done of course by contractors with coolie labor. The railway engineers in particular were excellent people, but they had their own camps and their own men to look after and couldn't be expected to leave them. It came down to the problem of meeting a hypothetical native rising with twelve men and fifty rifles. The thing looked impossible. If short-story writers have yet to learn that because a man happens to be coffee- or chocolate-colored he does not, just for that reason, faint at the sight of a rifle, officers who have served on the Northwest Frontier are better informed. True, the Bubu, although he has a genuine liking for raw meat, is not a fighting man, but then, neither are all Englishmen.

This alone was sufficient to worry Tracey, who had the professional soldier's preference for dying in his bed, and it came to him as an additional cause for pessimism that Quex would not tolerate any damage to Quex's property. The overt action which Quex had clearly anticipated must be going to take some other form, unless the whole idea of Quex's complicity was a fantastic nightmare. There would inevitably be extensive cattle-driving, but only because it provided an admirably simple way of paying the natives. Persons, not property, would be the objective.

The thought came to him as he sat smoking one

night, after his interview with that cheerful old scoundrel, the Governor of the province. He was not at his own headquarters, but at the outlying concession—Jobson's ranch as it was called after the manager, a hard-bitten beachcomber who had fought, farmed and got drunk in every quarter of the world before getting involved, by an unhappy accident, in as difficult a job of work as any he had avoided in the course of thirty-five pretty hectic years. The accident was that his only surviving relative was Hilda's aunt.

"What do you think of this show, Jobson?" Tracey asked suddenly as his reverie brought him to the point when he saw himself in a deucedly uncomfortable position.

"These dagoes won't do any harm to us if they're left alone," Jobson grunted.

"But if they're not?" Tracey spoke as casually as he could.

"What makes *you* ask that, Colonel?" Jobson asked, obviously surprised.

"One hears a lot of talk." Tracey was non-committal still.

"I don't," Jobson growled, "but I see a lot, and there's something up. Five of my boys want a week's holiday."

"From next Thursday, I suppose?" Tracey interrupted with a smile. "Give any reason?"

"None. But how the devil did you know about it?"

"I didn't. I just guessed. There seems to be a general desire in these parts for a change of air round about next Thursday."

Jobson looked at Tracey, and Tracey met his inquiry

with a nod. These two men with less in common than many a man has with his horse and his dog both knew the meaning of trouble; and this looked so like trouble as to be worth, even for Jobson, who had been out since five in the morning and liked to turn in at nine, another pipe and a half an hour's talk.

"Are they after me, or after you, or after the cattle, or after the whole damned lot of us?" Tracey asked, after helping himself to a third whisky.

"Not after me, unless *I* stop them taking my cattle. Not after you, unless *you* stop them taking my cattle. That's my reading of it." It was a long speech for Jobson and he got up to shake off the effects.

"Would it alter your view if I told you that his Excellency offered me his personal escort out of the province—to go with him to Ibbas on Thursday?"

Jobson swung round on his heels. He'd been in the ranks in the Coldstream twenty-five years ago and still moved like a soldier.

"It alters my view so damned quickly that I'd be grateful if you'd move your chair away from the light of that stinking acetylene lamp which is what the old man Quex thinks good enough for people who only work fifteen hours a day."

"I think I'm all right for another five days," Tracey laughed.

"Well, I'm old-fashioned," Jobson said in his slow way, "but if I've got only five days to live, I like to have 'em in full."

Tracey didn't move for a moment. Then he got up and went to the window.

It was certainly God's own country. On the plateau

where the ranch lay they were two thousand feet above sea-level, and now, in mid-October, a brilliant moon shone fitfully from a sky flecked with dark clouds driven before the steady wind from the hills. The moonlight, obscured from minute to minute, reappeared as regularly to lend to the tall cypress trees dotted here and there and to the gentle undulations of the ground, broken only by occasional patches of shrub, the fanciful outline of a dream picture called up from the romantic past of our illusions to fade like a mirage before the eyes of our manhood. Jobson joined Tracey at the window, and these two who had seen the luxuriance of the tropics and the desolate splendor of the Himalayan ranges at evening found in this African scene a peace, fertility and restraint rarely combined. Nothing of man's handiwork intruded, yet Nature also had stayed her hand to preserve a harmony. In the distance a range of low-lying hills shut out the view, not uncompromisingly like the Alps, but with an air almost regretful in its placidity.

"Looks peaceful enough," Jobson conceded.

But George Tracey had not done fifteen years on the Northwest Frontier for nothing, and his eyes rested without moving on a clump of bushes half a mile away.

"Put out the light," he said suddenly, and remained himself at the window. His eyes were only just getting used to the light.

"Any way in at the back?" Tracey asked without taking his eyes off his mark.

"Only windows, but the boys sleep underneath them. They're all right . . . not from these parts."

"Quite right." Tracey liked this queer card with his

wall eye and his rough West country drawl: and he seemed to know a thing or two. Suddenly:

"There they go," he said, and pointed in the direction of the bushes which he had been watching. Two forms were moving across their front away from their hiding place.

"What's over there?" Tracey whispered. The silence was oppressive.

"Poultry sheds," Jobson said with a shrug of the shoulders. "But they won't get in without waking someone. Shall I go and have a look?"

"No. I can get back anything that's stolen from his highly disingenuous Excellency tomorrow without wearing out good shoe leather tonight."

"In that case you had better turn in, Colonel. I'm going off to have a look-see." And Jobson fetched down his revolver from the wall and slipped it into his belt.

"I shouldn't . . . tonight," Tracey said.

"Sorry to disagree, Colonel, but if my fellows don't see me they'll think I've got the wind-up, and we shall have other batches of requests for a week's leave tomorrow."

"The more the better, I'm inclined to think. Do what you think best, Jobson, of course, but don't show fight whatever you run into. I'll tell you why when you come back. . . . And wake up your boys at the back first. I don't want to be shot in the back tonight at any rate."

"Better come with me," Jobson said. "I don't like leaving you here after what you've told me."

"It's because of what I've told you that I want to be left here," Tracey laughed. "But don't be long."

To face uncertain risks calls for a peculiar form of courage, and Tracey was conscious as he stood about in the pitch-darkness of the veranda waiting for Jobson's return that he didn't quite pass the test. Trained though he was by long experience, he found himself starting at shadows and watching the effect of the breeze on the long grass with alarm. Had he known that one man or even ten men were looking for his blood he would have been comparatively calm. A man can die only once. But a man can think about dying effectively an indefinite number of times and the habit grows on one on nights of stress, when Death holds his hand but without adequate warning of his intentions.

At last Jobson returned. "Everything peaceful . . . four fowls missing . . . not even a nigger dead as far as I can see. . . ."

"What about your boys who were in charge?" Tracey asked with a smile.

"The same old story," Jobson sneered. "These boys are all the same."

"Which is it: drink, sleep, or palm-oil?"

"That's the question, Colonel. If we knew that we should know a lot."

"Yet there's one man who could answer that question for us, and I've a damned good mind to wireless him."

"Who's that?" Jobson asked.

"Quex," Tracey said enigmatically, and went to his room for the night.

The next morning Tracey sent a wireless to Dick Livingstone. It contained only two words beyond the address and the signature: TODAY 8 P.M.

"What the hell does this mean? I mean if it's nothing personal," Jobson asked, his weather-beaten face wrinkled with a frown.

"It means that Livingstone drops a hint in the right quarter that something may begin to happen here on the date mentioned."

"A bit late, isn't it? Won't get it in time." Jobson was vaguely uncomfortable about the whole business.

"Code for 20th inst.," Tracey said shortly, and Jobson felt at his ease again. He liked things he could understand like whisky and horses and days of the month.

"What are we going to do about it?" Tracey asked, when his wireless had been sent off.

"Nothing," Jobson said: "just wait and see, I suppose."

"That'll hardly do, Jobson." Tracey shook his head very decidedly. "What we're up against is some sort of concerted outbreak against someone. Question is, against whom? It may be political. It may be racial. It may be merely robbery on a large scale. What's your guess?"

"Not political, I'm certain," said Jobson at once. "The Governor is too popular. He always accepts bribes and never collects taxes."

"I was afraid it was like that," Tracey looked serious.

"Meaning that it's we who are for it, not his Excellency," Jobson commented.

"Precisely." Tracey lit another pipe and sat down in front of a map. "Nice battle to fight if one had any troops," he muttered under his breath after a ten minutes' scrutiny.

"Headquarters of the business is Lulong," Jobson said, "but I suppose you know that."

"H'm. Yes. I suppose so. We found that out over that raiding affair at No. 5 last year." Tracey relapsed into silence and Jobson went off on his morning rounds. As he got to the door Tracey shouted: "Give anyone leave who asks for it."

"You mean it?" Jobson asked, mystified once more.

"Yes," Tracey said curtly, as if colonels never said anything they didn't mean, and resumed his study of the map.

When Jobson came back for dinner he found Tracey sitting contented in a chair with a whisky bottle open on the table reading an out-of-date copy of the "Pink 'un."

"Any news?" He looked up as Jobson threw his hat across on to a peg in the opposite corner. Jobson had his conceits.

"Four more requests for leave . . . all granted," he grunted in answer to Tracey's inquiry. "You look deucedly comfortable."

"I am," Tracey answered, helping himself to another drink and passing the bottle across. "Here's to our battle."

Tracey had taken his decision.

For the sake of decent dealing and the reputation of British integrity, he had to leave the first move to the other side. And it was waste of time, of course,

asking anything from the native authorities until something happened. There was only one solution to the problem and that was the solution he unfolded to his strange lieutenant over the dinner table. But it meant victory at the first blow or war. Some Boer commandoes had played the game for as much as eighteen months, but in a friendly country. Stonewall Jackson's men had played it for three months in the Shenandoah Valley. But it was doubtful if it could be played in Bubuland for a week. On the other side of the picture was the chance—more than an even chance—that an initial success, on which they could pretty well count, would be sufficient.

The alternative was hopeless. To sit down and do nothing meant either an abject surrender at the first show of force, or a futile attempt to deal with the trouble as it arose under conditions and at a time chosen by the bloodthirsty rascals who were behind the rising.

Tracey called a council of war, for the two days ahead. He called it ostentatiously to meet under the eyes of the Governor in broad daylight. It was just a chance that the knowledge that some concerted action was being planned by the "white colony" might stop the trouble before it began. It was a greater chance that it would merely multiply the danger a thousandfold, but that chance had to be faced. George Tracey was for the English way. He didn't believe in stealing a march on a hypothetical enemy.

The flaw in the plan was the possible objection of these twelve curiously assorted Englishmen who were to find themselves suddenly the minute garrison of a

beleaguered territory. There are men who in such circumstances tend to surrender . . . they call it seeking a peaceful solution. . . .

Tracey spent the two days before his somewhat attenuated army assembled in collecting information. A valuable hint came from Dick Livingstone, whose cable read: "Quex selling." More direct information came from the British Legation in response to a cipher telegram asking if they had any confirmation of current reports of the chance of a local rising in the south. The Government, the reply stated, reported everything quiet, but "agents expect trouble." Odd word, "trouble," Tracey mused, remembering how in the mouths of the poor it always meant prison, while for the politician it meant nothing more serious than defeat at an election. For the soldier it was different. It meant victory—perhaps: the price of victory, certainly. Funny thing, language.

This language question, as a matter of fact, was a very burning one with Tracey when he was thinking out the lines of his talk to the senior staff of the Corporation. It was one thing to give orders to a crowd of junior officers anxious for military laurels, and quite another to talk to a group of civilians united only by the common sympathy which binds employees together against their employer. It was not his decision which worried him. The utmost possible risk, the least possible personal advantage was an old principle with soldiers of Tracey's generation. The brilliant officer who had made it the foundation of his teaching had died long since, undecorated and content with the deep disapproval of the Army Council. But the seed that

he had sown had ripened in Flanders and the fact that the harvest had been squandered by dishonorable men was merely the logical ending to an epic of disinterested endurance in the twentieth century. No! it was not any flaw in his argument which troubled George Tracey. The seed he had to sow was good, but what of the ground? For the casual recruit to the army of industry the issues were not so simple. "I have loved justice and hated iniquity and, therefore, I die in exile." The truth of that historic and crushing verdict on Western civilization had never come home more forcibly to George Tracey than at that moment. But was it true for these men? There was a cause and an occasion, but both lay obscure beneath the surface of a routine neither noble nor disinterested. As Tracey put it to himself, in language more apt to the situation: "These beggars think that their job is to carry on and make money. . . . How am I to get them to see that their job—I can't talk to them about duty—is to chuck up their money-making and play at soldiers?"

His one comfort was that Jobson had seen it. . . . Stout fellow, Jobson . . . his lieutenant had no illusions—ten years in the Congo had killed them—about the moral superiority of the white man. But he did know that in the long run the man who stayed and fought was a better man than the other fellow, and that in the still longer run it was for the good that the battle should go to the strong. As he put it, without any exaggerated notion of uplift: "We may be doing good here, or again we may not, but it's certain that mere theft and murder does no one any good."

"You mean," Tracey had said, "that a little logic and method is better than mere savagery, even if the method is itself . . . well, not altogether sound?"

"If you like to put it like that," Jobson had grunted, and relapsed into his drink again.

When it came to the time Tracey found his difficulties less than he had feared. One and all had got tired of the continual interruption of their night's rest by marauding Bubus. Their reasons for resentment were various and not all of ethical importance, but the fact gave Tracey a basis on which to work. Jesuitical as all men of caste, he had no scruple in using whatever appeal he found more useful to secure the adoption of a policy which he thought fundamentally right. Some agreed with him because the Bubus were black. Some because their own favorite wife was white. Others, again, resented the interruption of their debauches. And genuinely behind him were Jobson and one or two others who felt the impossibility of the rule of the raider and cattle thief as a thing inherently indecent in any place at any time.

Logically, of course, the strongest point for Tracey was that, failing concerted action, one or another of them would certainly fall victim to the first organized raid which the rebels might make. But this point, oddly enough, was not as effective as the inhabitants of Putney or Wimbledon might suppose. These men were quite hardened to the good fortune which had left them, after years of adventure in every corner of the globe, in full possession of their faculties, and they were quite content to gamble on its continuance. A

couple of well-aimed revolver shots might well save their own lives though they would do nothing to save the Company's property.

Someone indeed pointed this out as an argument against inaction, but the Scots manager of No. 3 camp voiced the general sense of the meeting when he said "Damn the Company," in a loud voice. Quex was somehow not a name to conjure with, and Tracey made a joyous mental note of the fact that the power of criticism still survived north of the Tweed.

Yet, in the end, the whole lot of them came into line. It was a queer moment when the time came for the twelve men to pledge themselves in a round of double whiskies to as desperate an adventure as any undertaken by Arthur and his knights. The moment, for every one of the twelve save one—a beardless boy of 21 who had learned his agriculture at South Kensington and his knowledge of the world at the National Liberal Club—must have kindled memories. Tracey remembered the night before Loos—his last appearance as a regimental officer—when he and his two oldest friends in the regiment with twenty years of memories crowding in on them had wished each other good luck in one half-filled tumbler of rum and water, and his colonel had said, cheerily too, that it didn't matter if any of them went under, "We've had our turn . . . it is the youngsters I'm sorry for"; and he himself had turned to the colonel and reminded him that there were two boys in the battalions who had never been to Ascot. "Here's luck to 'em when they go," the colonel had said, and meant it. *Dis aliter visum.*

And George Tracey, the only survivor of that fatal day, had never gone to Ascot since.

Would he have another chance, he wondered. It suddenly occurred to him that Hilda would enjoy it.

And then Tracey found himself surrounded by his little army shaking him by the hand and taking note of the rendezvous for the night of the 20th. Well: Hilda would have to take her chance of Ascot now.

The days passed slowly after the council of war, but not too slowly for Tracey who spent every daylight riding and motoring over the country with Jobson. It was more promising for his venture than he had expected from the map, which gave only five-hundred-foot contours, and concealed many—from a military point of view—attractive features. The greatest difficulty had been to decide whether to rely on horses or cars, but Tracey, as became a soldier of the old school, stood out for horses. Less like a soldier of the old school he happened to be right. The horse gave less speed but incalculably more mobility in almost virgin country; and it was on mobility that the plan relied.

Yet it would be hardly descriptive of Tracey's state of mind to speak of him as relying on anything. He had come out as a lamb to the sacrifice, and the victim was ready. He knew that Quex had deliberately sent him out because he was a man who, by tradition and belief, would face death as a matter of course if occasion arose. This was the occasion, and that was all there was to say about it. Of course, some people would have declined with thanks, merely out of con-

tempt for Quex, but Quex had known Tracey well enough to see that his mind wouldn't work that way.

All the same, as the end of his time for mere thinking drew near, Tracey felt almost a sympathy for Quex sitting so anxiously in London, because in the long run the victory he meant to win would not be a victory for Quex at all, but for decency and the force of character which could keep its integrity in desert places and lay up its treasure where dividends are not paid on watered capital.

Two days before what had become fixed already in Tracey's mind as the predestined dawn of his adventure, he called once more on the Governor. He was welcomed, literally, with open arms.

"Ah, my friend, so you will come with me after everything to see the ladies . . . *hein?*"

"Alas, your Excellency, that is a privilege for more leisured men. I have to stay here to see . . . the fun."

"What fun?" The corpulent suavity of the ruler of vast territories was disturbed as by an earthquake.

"Perhaps your Excellency can tell me. I hear reports but can get no particulars, and I blame myself for not having asked you before for the benefit of your advice."

"You are polite, my Colonel," the Governor smiled once again, "and most kind, but if I had any information to give you which might keep you here I should not ask you, as I do again, to come away and enjoy yourself . . . 'make hay,' I think you English say."

"Only while the sun shines, is our saying." Tracey

felt at home with this sort of palavering whose mysteries he had first penetrated as a political officer in Afghanistan twenty years before. "But does the sun shine?" Tracey registered sternness at this point.

"It may well shine more at Ibbas-Ibba, Colonel Tracey," was the expected reply. Prudence among the educated Bubus assumes easily the garb of wisdom.

"Perhaps I may be allowed to join you there later?" Tracey asked.

But his Excellency had done his best, and was disinclined to do more. He got up—itself a rare and laborious courtesy—and Tracey was dismissed.

"My countrymen in these distant provinces are not very civilized, Colonel Tracey. You would find them better company further north. But these visits of mine are not often. I may be gone if you wait too long."

Tracey smiled his way out. The old scoundrel had done his best, and if his best was not particularly helpful, Tracey was not disappointed. His mind, passively awaiting the inevitable, was attuned to the peace and beauty of these October days, and he could barely bring himself to wish that things were otherwise. At the eleventh hour perhaps might come a sinking of the heart, but the time for that was not yet.

The night before, his plans completed, Tracey sat down to write to Hilda. It was a piece of soldierly routine which he had never forgotten in the course of half a dozen campaigns. First of all, of course, his mother had been the recipient of his taciturn confidences in his superiority to the arrows of fortune: he recalled her as he had last seen her sitting by the fire

at her home in Somerset, a graceful skeleton facing with Victorian sternness the passing of an epoch which for culture, honor and courage far surpassed all previous or subsequent generations. Her attitude of aloofness had amused him once, in Edwardian days of pleasure. But when it came to the end—she had died just two years before the war, when the cloud was still no bigger than a man's hand—he had known that something had passed out of life which, for all its hardness, was, in the slang of the period, "better value" than anything which remained. She had not, of course, passed out of his life . . . she had remained, fixed as a standard of detached integrity, teaching an utter indifference to sentimental considerations threatening the foundations of the ten commandments and the British Constitution. But her example seemed now to be with him alone.

His aunt, the recipient of his maturer homage, had been different. She was above mere standards, not by intellectual conviction, but simply out of pride. He had known in her the animated relics of a great style and the last representative of a great name. The style was really all that remained to respect, but the tribute he had paid was none the less sincere—actually more so, as a matter of hard fact, because that particular style exorcised automatically all mere sentimental observances.

And now he was writing to his wife, who understood nothing of these ghosts of the past crowding in on his reveries, and who could have cared less than nothing. Yet she pleased him still, as he saw her again against the green and gray of Tracey Hall on an

April morning, and he found it hard to write to her even of the passing incidents of this other life into which she had thrown him, incredibly innocently, he didn't doubt—but simply for her delectation.

He sat for half an hour or more with a pen in hand, writing not a line. What was there to say, after all? He had only begun to understand her during those two days after their return to town when she stood up for her utterly futile ideas against as naked an array of damning facts as ever sent a politician to the House of Lords. She had never got near to understanding how "impossible" it all was—the word was not apparently in her vocabulary—but she had let him have his own way without a protest except perhaps from the heart. He had been made to feel not quite as unselfish as she had wished, not quite as reconciled as an ardent lover should be to the sacrifice of mere convictions to an exacting occasion. But it was obviously the privilege of a generation without standards to look down on more old-fashioned people lagging behind in the scramble for spoils, and at least she had exercised it with a mixture of restraint and affection which was certainly intended to soften the rebuke, and perhaps even to conceal it.

Yet he hesitated to take quite that for granted. There was always the chance that he would be back in England in a few weeks with the rest of his life secured to him at the price of her romantic illusions. Could she face such an issue made a thousand times clearer if he professed to the end a wooden insensibility to her unspoken exhortations?

In the end he gave it up and just wrote a line to say

how busy he was and how he hoped to have time to write more fully later. "Things may get exciting here in a day or so," he ended up, "and if so I shan't regret having come back, whatever the result. As long as I stay here I shall keep my wicket up, so you needn't have any worries on that score."

It was not quite the passionate gesture of farewell which he had meant to write when he first sat down, but it was enough. Nothing else remained to be said upon a perfectly simple issue unless, of course, he told the truth. But he couldn't put down in black and white that he was probably going to be killed by a lot of hired desperadoes, whose activities were subsidized by Quex among others in the interests of a little Stock Exchange jugglery and as an incentive to British intervention. And he couldn't say that the whole business was so nastily intricate in its ramifications that he still had no intention of going on with it if he happened to be alive in six weeks' time. This sort of candor was all right for artists and people in Russian novels, but it was hopeless for him. In any case Hilda knew as much as she wanted to know, and could preserve precisely as many of her fancies as she chose. That was one of the privileges of living in the twentieth century —the second childhood of faith as Dick Livingstone used to call it, in his odd way.

And so, instead of unburdening his soul in burning words, he went to bed.

As he lay awake, he wondered, inevitably, whether this was the end. He didn't mind so much if it was, because he knew in his heart that the future which he had dreamed of on that fateful April morning eighteen

months before was in any case lost to him. Hilda and he could be happy only as long as they were shirking issues and putting off decisions. Her gaiety and her beauty held him still at her command, but with the final reservation that his soul remained his own. The reservation had seemed trifling and almost obvious in the early days of their engagement. It ceased altogether to matter in their three weeks' happiness after the wedding. But it threw an ominous shadow over the future. He wasn't cast for the rôle of the complaisant husband, and in default of a miracle he could not sustain indefinitely the burden of his wife's exuberant optimism and a passion for excitement which made real life seem by comparison modest in its demands. But Hilda was only a figure in George Tracey's eminently philosophic retrospect. The background of his life was the moving pageant of events. Their causes deep in history were instinctively understood, he liked to fancy, by one brought up in the shadow of Victorianism at its zenith, heir to a name, a property and a tradition, remote by the fortunate chance of poverty from contamination with a less provident and austere generation. Of course, the real trouble was, as Dick Livingstone always said, that the age of reason had drawn to a too rapid close.

The fancies of this new age meant nothing to the peace of Tracey's soul, but they affected the peace of his mind to an unpleasant extent. The simple answers to complex questions which he had inherited from his mother had solved the problems of adolescence more or less, and had piloted him through the early stages of an army career. But he had noticed that in these

later days they had ceased to impress even his contemporaries. You didn't even send in your papers when you were discovered in an intrigue with a notorious demi-mondaine. . . . Yet if you said what you thought about a fellow like Lord Soulle you were "for it." George Tracey, getting sleepy, gave it up. And getting more sleepy he reflected that that was just the trouble in these days . . . the right kind of people were always giving it up . . . he had seen a man in the stalls at the opera in plus-fours only two months ago, and nobody seemed to mind. . . . Then there was that queer fellow Quex . . . just a crook . . . and a K.B.E. . . . poor old C——!

And with that cheerful image of a man born twenty years before his time floating before his mind Tracey fell asleep and dreamt of Hilda standing in the dock and being told by the judge that she had no single redeeming feature. But Hilda merely smiled and Tracey, who had taken advantage of the strange inconsistency of dreamland to step into the judge's shoes, once more gave it up.

The dawn of October 20th was golden and George Tracey woke from his dreams with peace in his heart. At his window, looking out over the wide expanse of undulating grassland, it seemed impossible to imagine that even the most distant horizon concealed a threat to his comfort. Jobson and he had breakfast on the veranda in silence. There was nothing more to be done except to wait on the grotesque event.

"We shall look damned silly if nothing happens," was Jobson's lugubrious comment.

Tracey agreed. And in the profound quiet of the morning he felt, if the truth be told, "damned silly" already. It was so much easier to sit still and say nothing than to make plans in advance and risk being made a fool of.

"I think we're all right," he said cynically. . . . "These people all know there's something up, or they wouldn't be running off in all directions all at the same time. It's their notion of loyalty, you see."

"Running away?" Jobson was heavily sarcastic.

"No; giving a warning," Tracey corrected his lieutenant sharply. He was going to face this job like a soldier with no bother about rights or wrongs to worry him. He had his own views on Bubu morality but the moral issue was done with for the moment. The time had come for business.

The morning was spent according to program in a long ride round the extreme boundaries of the concession. Not a soul was to be seen. This was more or less a confirmation of their worst fears and Tracey went in to dinner with a sigh of relief.

"You're a cheerful beggar, Colonel," Jobson grunted as they sat down. "You seem to see something funny in facing a few thousand thieving natives with a scratch crew of twelve men, half of whom, if I know anything of them, will lose their way in the dark and never turn up at all."

"Oh, they'll turn up all right," Tracey said quietly, ignoring the personal aspect of Jobson's remark. "They'll be damned fools if they don't."

"Murdered in their beds?" Jobson queried grimly.

"Good Lord, no! . . . Sacked," Tracey answered.

To be murdered was, in his experience, part of the lot of man. To be sacked was in an altogether more damning category. Only a "damned fool" risked that.

Oddly enough Jobson took his point. This queer colonel was to his taste. He was so simple . . . so unlike those dagoes he had to deal with on the Congo and in Mexico.

No more was said over the meal, and the two conspirators retired to their rooms after lunch as serenely as if they were meditating a visit to a music hall. It was the army way, Tracey reflected rather proudly. Jobson just snored.

The brief twilight came at six o'clock and found them both ready. They had ordered their horses at 6:15 every day for some days past to avoid any kind of suspicion attending their departure and their six days' rations packed in the usually empty saddle-bags would not be noticed. Side by side they rode on their fifteen miles' ride.

Not a word was spoken. This was not the much vaunted taciturnity of the man of action—the most verbose fellow in the world if we except Thomas Carlyle—but a measure of precaution matched to the audacity of the adventure. Tracey felt a strange exhilaration.

Night had fallen when Tracey, no longer the African Manager of the Bubuland Corporation but the vanguard of an army, reached the little copse which was the appointed rendezvous. Jobson had remained three miles behind—one of the outposts watching events; three others of the party were also out at different

points. Tracey had with him exactly seven men, and of these one had to look after the two spare horses which were all they could take with them.

The news was sufficiently ominous. Everyone but Tracey had seen or heard of small parties of natives moving in the direction of Lulong that morning or even before. The country as a whole was quiet . . . there was no doubt on that score, but the word seemed to have been passed to every doubtful character within 300 miles and the malcontents obviously numbered over a hundred. An initial success would set the whole district ablaze, and an initial defeat would be hardly likely to do more good. The best that could be said was that the mass of the tribes were definitely neutral, and the only hope was to keep them in this uncharacteristic condition till help came.

Having got what news there was Tracey sat down on a tree trunk and lit his pipe. There was nothing more to be done till they got news of some definitely illegal action. It was still possible that nothing might happen. For the first time Tracey found himself half hoping that this might be the case. It was the uncertainty which wears men out before a battle that began to take a toll on his vitality as one hour lengthened into two and two into three. At last news came, and, as Tracey had hoped, it came from Jobson. Here at least was something to go on.

Parties of men, one or two mounted, most of them not, had been seen making their way west, presumably towards the ranch. Jobson thought there must have been thirty or forty in the party he had seen and, of course, there might be others.

"If there aren't we've got the one chance in a thousand which we wanted," Tracey commented. "But there's not a moment to be lost." In five minutes the party was moving.

Everything had been planned ready for this particular development, and the exact point at which they should face the raiders on their return had been chosen. Tracey led the way in silence. The greatest risk was still lest these nocturnal wanderers should turn out to have been merely on their lawful occasions. Tracey was clear enough on that, and the responsibility was his and his alone. He was riding with one of the younger men, Jefferson of No. 1 ranch, a hundred yards ahead of the party, along a defile which shut out their view on either side. This was the dangerous moment of their ride because if by any chance their movements were known they could be held up. On the other hand they were safe from casual observation. They were riding due south to strike the customary track from the ranch to Lulong by which they expected the raiders to return. At the end of the defile the party halted, and while Jobson went on foot to reconnoiter, Tracey climbed the western bank of the defile—a gentle slope of not more than 250 yards, which commanded a wide view. The first thing he saw was a glow in the western sky. The Nissen huts on Jobson's ranch were burning merrily. They had made a very wide detour to get to the original rendezvous, and as the crow flies the huts were a bare seven miles away. In an hour and a half the raiders should be back. But were they raiders, or just unsuccessful murderers? And in that case what was to be done?

Tracey decided to go on. It was a thousand to one that they had stolen something and in any case he had been careful to leave the huts entirely unguarded, to prevent the pretense that the damage, if any, had been done in his absence by his own people. And this sort of thing couldn't be allowed to go on.

Another quarter of an hour's ride took them to their new post—a low bank overlooking the track on the southern side, just high enough to enable them to tether their horses, if necessary, behind it. Here they must wait on events. They had another two hours of darkness, but there was enough moonlight for them to see all that was necessary.

At last, after what seemed an eternity, came the sound of galloping horses, and Tracey had to take his first decision. He conferred hurriedly with Jobson and they agreed to let them go. It would be impossible to prove the complicity of individuals, and obviously firing would warn the main party who were on foot. There was a little murmuring at the instruction not to fire, particularly from two of the party who had been refreshing themselves with liberal pulls at capacious flasks. Tracey was stern.

"Take my orders or clear out," he said roughly. "But if you stay, do what you're told." They stayed, and Tracey had to be satisfied, but his disquiet was increased by the sight of half a dozen Bubus flashing past him, superbly mounted and riding hell for leather. "Those fellows have seen something they don't like," he murmured to Jobson.

"Found out your game, probably," Jobson said in his best imitation of a whisper.

But there was nothing to be done. If he called off the whole business now the game was up, and the villages would rise against the concessions one by one and wipe them out. They must act, and pretty vigorously too. Tracey sent Jefferson on foot to skirt the track and see if he could see anything. He wanted a cigarette badly, but did not dare risk it. Another infernal wait of half an hour and everyone was restive. Suddenly Jefferson ran into the group.

"They're coming," he said, "about thirty of 'em."

Tracey climbed hurriedly up the bank and lay flat, looking up the sandy track. He could see a group of figures half a mile away; in another minute or two he would be able to see them clearly. Then a cloud, little bigger than a man's hand, obscured the face of the moon and Tracey looked out into darkness. He could hear the rhythmless tread of undisciplined feet, and that was all. It was not desperate. It was fatal. For two minutes George Tracey lay still, staring in a blackness rendered doubly opaque by the brilliance which had preceded it. Suddenly a fitful glimmer lit up once more the broad ribbon of dust. It was too late. Not a soul was to be seen. The next that would be seen was when the leaders came round the bend ten yards away.

Tracey had five minutes in which to reach his decision, but he needed only a fraction of a moment. Fate, which had smiled seductively on his intrepid imaginings, had turned on him at the crisis. He could only carry out his plan now if he took the initiative regardless, not of consequences, which he had reckoned up ten days ago, but of the merits of the case. To wait

and see was to subject his men to avoidable and, indeed, desperate risks. Neither course was possible.

After a whispered consultation with Jobson he mounted his horse and rode out on to the track. In a second he had passed out of sight.

Yet Tracey did not conceal from himself that he still had a chance. His soldierly figure, motionless on his horse, silhouetted against the skyline, unarmed but unafraid, might still do the trick. It was lucky, he reflected grimly, that it was easier to look brave than to feel brave, especially on a horse, which imparts in some mysterious way to its rider a trifle of the scorn and pity of the dumb for men who air their grievances noisily in the arena. He rode on without appearing to flinch. The first impression was everything. The thing had, as a matter of fact, been done before, in 1912, by a brave man who had rescued three fellow explorers by advancing unarmed on their captors and insisting, as a matter of course, on their release. That was the better way, but in his heart Tracey had no great anticipation of a similar issue here, and he found himself echoing oddly Quex's phrase: "There's too much money in it."

Suddenly the crisis was upon him. Headed by two horsemen, the party came swinging along at a good pace, most of them armed, and driving with them a dozen head of cattle. Tracey brought his horse to a walk. The others halted for a moment as he came into sight and gave him a chance for his gesture. He rode on without moving a muscle. Suddenly, as he came within fifty yards, a murmur of recognition ran

through the groups in front of him. Still he went on, preparing a short speech to deliver to this strange audience, who, for aught he knew, had gone out only a few hours before to murder him. The speech was not delivered.

Only two shots were heard behind the bank, and the second was unmistakably the report of Tracey's army revolver. It was enough for Jobson, who signaled to the rest—they were his men now—to mount. Even the owners of the flasks were ready and the strange army galloped down the path with a will. As they came round the bend they saw George Tracey lying in the sand with his horse standing over him. Fifty yards away were the raiders resting on their unexpected success.

Of the issue of the battle, begun with a sacrifice so complete and so invaluable, there could be no doubt. A shot or two from the rifles of the Bubus pierced the uncertain darkness and landed harmlessly on the countryside beyond, but otherwise it was a one-sided conflict in which British integrity demanded a heavy toll in blood for the suspicions directed against it by a primitive civilization. Seventeen lives paid forfeit for that one panic-stricken rifle shot which had cut short George Tracey's first public utterance. It was not that honor was satisfied at that point, but that the enemy had disappeared. The army followed suit and made off according to plan, to No. 3 ranch, fifty miles away.

"Strange he should have gone ahead like that," Jefferson remarked to Jobson as they rode away.

"I know why he did," Jobson said gruffly. . . . He

wanted no obituary notice for himself and was content to leave "the Colonel" to the same anonymity.

But Jefferson pressed his question. He was young, and death was an event without precedent which called for examination.

"If you want to know, the Colonel was a bit odd," Jobson said finally; "he always wanted the other fellows to get their shot in first."

"Damned silly, I call it," Jefferson said, utterly bewildered.

"You'd have thought it sillier, young man, if he'd sent you out to work the oracle, as I asked him to," Jobson replied, and Jefferson was silent for nearly an hour till one of his friends shouted across to him to ask him what the trouble was.

"I'm thinking," Jefferson answered shortly, and went on with his strange avocation while the morning sun beat down on the dusty cavalcade, pursuing its even and unromantic path across the trackless dust which held the promise for Quex of such a golden harvest.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ON October 22 England was ablaze with headlines. The "murder of an officer" was no more than a feature. Reuters, and the assiduous services of "a well-informed correspondent at Aden," had lifted the fog of war and revealed no fewer than five concerted attacks on the property of the Bubuland Corporation. The loss of life, "deeply regrettable" as it was (to quote from the contemporary files of the Times), was "only one episode in a deeply disturbing sequence of events." British capital was in danger.

Quex had felt an inward glow when the first intimations of the disaster reached him in the shape of a cipher telegram from Leukopatras two days before. Everything was clearly proceeding according to plan. He had taken the precaution of a final interview with Lord Soulle, but it was, as it turned out, quite unnecessary. Granted that an incident occurred—"a deplorable contingency, my dear Quex, which as men of the world we are bound to provide for"—the P. M. was whole-heartedly agreed that the most forcible measures should be taken, and that no settlement should be made which did not finally insure full administrative control of the territory covered by the concessions.

With these statesmanlike counsels echoing in his

ears, Quex had been happy to wait on the event. He never imagined for a moment that anything serious would result from the activities of his agent's emissaries. He realized, of course, that there might be "a few casualties," but he had, as he himself said, a sense of proportion. Huge fortunes were not made without risk. St. Paul had reached a somewhat similar conclusion—the palm could be won not without dust and heat—and the twentieth century had merely proved the truth of the gospel of progress by devising machinery whereby those who experienced the dust and heat were under the necessity of handing over the palm, when won, to somebody else. To do Quex justice, he thought this arrangement absolutely right. It was obvious that a man could not amass a large private fortune—though he preferred to speak of representing the interests of a large number of shareholders—and do any work at the same time. He saw Bubuland, and only professed to see it, through the wrong end of the telescope—a patch of barren mud illuminated by a glint of gold.

If in talking to Hilda Tracey he sometimes referred to Bubuland as posing problems it was simply because she seemed to thrill to the idea of that vast territory teeming with hidden wealth and potential fertility, and it amused him to play the part of the god in the car, calling with far-sighted energy on the old world to redress the balance of the new. He liked to see the dawning admiration in her daring gray eyes, the impudent assumption of a vicarious dominion over the uncharted acres which for more practical people existed only as an entry in a balance sheet. Indeed, when the

whole of England seemed likely to ring with the names of places utterly unfamiliar to him he had had to send for a map. He hadn't the least idea where they were. Even the Soulle of honor had been shocked at his frankness. "We're men of the world," he had said with an unfriendly laugh, "but some of my colleagues will expect you to supply their own deficiencies. Lestrade will, for one."

"Damn Lestrade," Quex had said, much annoyed, but he had gone home to his map for all that.

It was late on the evening of the 21st that the authentic news reached him. He was genuinely upset. It is one thing to contemplate someone else's death as a "contingency to be faced," another to find that you have committed a murder. It was the sort of difference which meant everything to Quex. He had foreseen the chance that in an organized war Tracey might possibly die a soldier's death—death, somehow, sounded better, qualified in this way—but that the business should actually boil down to the utterly unprovoked killing of this one man was too complete a circle of events to be pleasing. Just for a moment a ray of light entered the dark places of his soul and the fantastic philosophies which contrived the superficial harmony of his reason fled like nightmare shadows before the clean impact of dawn. For a moment Quex felt himself a little naked in the face of eternity.

If a regret could have brought the dead to life, Quex would never have reached the House of Lords and Hilda Altamont would never have found happiness and God on the shores of the Mediterranean. But in the gathering dusk Quex rose from his desk and turned

on the electric light. It was the gesture of unrepentance, a final exhibition of the peculiar quality which made him certainly unique and possibly significant in an age when even criminals compromise with their creditors and parsons play golf on Sunday. Quex, facing his last crisis, remained as he had begun—different.

The differences of Artemas Quex! What a title for a story! Yet the plain truth about it would seem, written down, too obvious for the vulgar and too simple for the curious. For in the ordinary affairs he was no worse and no better than his fellows. It was just that the lie which is in the soul of every person assessable for income tax had become, for him, the truth. The whole force of a dominant personality was concentrated, not in exorcising it, but in retaining it enthroned ever more securely above the decent instincts which he feared to share with poorer men.

The greatness of Artemas Quex! It was admittedly something different from that of which poets sing in the language of God or philosophers mumble in the halting accents of professors. It was different even from the brazen greatness of your public men, magniloquently posturing for their obituary notices. Yet it was real. No one but Quex would have rung up his broker five minutes after getting the news of the terrible havoc wrought by his too subtle imagination. The fact was that he shared, oddly enough, with his less gifted victim, a sheer objectivity which could override, at a crisis, and almost without effort, all the promptings of sentiment. George Tracey meant to keep his hands clean and was dead. Quex meant to get his peerage and had to get the money to pay for it.

Not till this was arranged for did he turn to his second task. It was ten o'clock in the evening before Hilda Tracey heard the report of that fatal rifle four thousand miles away.

Yet she had heard it in her imagination for many days. When Quex rang her up, after fixing things up satisfactorily with his brokers, she had feared simply an invitation to the Embassy Club. It was the measure of her disenchantment that even these constant excitements had ceased to please. Reality had forced its attentions on her at last—a new and strange reality of emptiness, of anxiety, of the barren weariness of introspection which is the lot of those who make hay without waiting for the sun to shine.

Inevitably she alternated between a deep disappointment at the indifference of her husband whom she had not ceased to love, and a passionate resentment at the attentions of Quex whom she had not ceased to admire. She had taken refuge in her loyalty to the legendary figure of George maintaining the interests and prestige of her adventure against the challenge of nature and the inclinations of an almost undeniable middle age. The middle age was the only touch of truth which she had allowed to obtrude on the fanciful picture to which she clung, as the southern races cling to their pious relics in the face of the malignity of fate and the sorrows of an infelicitous existence.

It would have been simple for her to set her anxieties at rest by proclaiming to herself her fidelity. But Hilda Altamont wasn't simple. Unfortunately, she

knew only too well that fidelity didn't really enter into the business at all. She wondered, indeed, whether she had even been capable of it where George—the real George—was concerned.

And anyway, was this devotion to his memory more than a device of her troubled soul for keeping a just balance between her illusions about George's chivalry and her untested faith in Quex's disinterested sympathy? She had all a woman's passionate desire to keep the gilt on the gingerbread as long as possible.

It had been pretty difficult in these last weeks of George's final adventure. The gilt was wearing pretty thin. She had plunged on George's departure into as hectic a round of dinners and dances and parties as her acquaintances saw fit to provide, but the excitement was somehow insufficient when Quex was away, and indefinably excessive when he was there. Of course, he understood her—she told herself that again and again—and of course George was made of wood, or stone, or whatever the stuff was on which nothing in the world could make the slightest impression. But George was gone . . .

That was just the trouble. She couldn't say quite definitely that he had failed her when he was out there in Bubuland with every kind of menace hanging over his head. Even Quex had had to admit that much, though he found it a little difficult to keep his temper when George's good qualities were rammed down his throat obviously in sheer desperation on half a dozen occasions. Most galling of all was the pitiful appeal she had addressed to him once to "make George under-

stand." The irony of it! Quex had a sense of humor, as we know, but there were times and places when even humor was out of place.

Quex had been very odd altogether on that particular night. He had seemed absurdly indifferent to George's views about anything, and was strangely insistent on his own prescriptive right to take her interests in his charge. And Hilda had gone home very tired and anxious and wished suddenly that George would return. And then still more suddenly it came to her that perhaps Quex didn't expect him to return. And every other night after that she wondered whether there was any chance that George might be killed out there—or just die—and that she might be left alone.

Of course, it was fantastic. She told herself that over and over again, but the idea kept on recurring at odd intervals, especially when in an almost virginal reaction from Quex's overmastering attentions, she fell back for solace on her romantic picture of George fighting the heathen dragon on her behalf with a recklessness which almost redeemed him from the charge of being hopelessly dull.

Yet in all the weariness of her thinking there had been one element lacking and that was fear. She might wonder, and might luxuriate of a night-time in an imagined grief or a glimpse of passion seen through the veil of sleep, but she hadn't faced cold facts in the light of day. She was running away from them with her every thought and her every emotion; the fear which chills the heart and paralyzes the senses is known only to brave spirits. Panic is a very different thing.

She was often in a panic and during these difficult

weeks her panics had been incessant in their demands on her energies.

"If George doesn't come back soon I shall go mad," she said to herself that evening as the telephone bell rang and she heard Quex's familiar voice at the other end of the telephone. . . .

"Bad news," she repeated, catching up Quex's nervous staccato: "Very bad news."

"Not about . . . about George?" she asked. Facts were staring her in the face now and the courage that had eluded her over these seven weeks came to her at last. "Tell me everything, please, at once, quite simply."

And then Quex told her.

She cut short his conventional sympathies and put back the receiver, standing motionless all the time.

She stood there—the telephone was on a tall bureau at the end of the room and her elbow rested easily on it —for a full five minutes looking beyond the vulgar furniture of the flat across the noise of the street on to the river. The moon was behind the clouds, but there was a faint light over the still waters which had been flowing on for centuries, while men schemed and fought and died.

She found it difficult to move. It was silly to keep on standing, looking at the river which could give no answer to her questions. But its placid movement soothed her, and its indifferent beauty. Yet that, too, was fleeting, she remembered, for the daylight which George was to see no more was waiting to open for her the full horizon of her grief.

She sat down and cried.

And then by a miracle she felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up into the face of Dick Livingstone. She went on crying, and he stood behind her moved to a pity too deep for tears.

"Oh, why didn't someone make me understand?" she sobbed pitifully, and turned to him for comfort.

"I'm afraid there is nothing that we can understand of God's wisdom, Hilda," he said in an even voice: "We can only try and understand a little of His mercy."

"I think I do understand . . . a little, Dick." Hilda checked her tears.

"That *is* God's mercy, my dear," Dick said gently, as he stooped down and kissed her.

THE END